



RESEARCH

The Politics of Projects in Westminster and Public Sector Initiatives

SEPTEMBER 2025

About Dods Group

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This report was prepared and written by Tony McNulty and Robin Campbell, with responsibility for the research and conclusions contained within.

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	14
Background and Context	18
Case Study	20
Crossrail	21
Thames Tideway	27
The Politics of Projects – Key Issues	31
Introduction to project management literature	31
Problems Appraising Projects	33
The over-emphasis on economic value in appraising projects	33
Regional bias in the location of projects	35
Complex, outdated and manipulable methodology	36
Interactions with Westminster	42
Political intervention	42
Gold-plating projects	44
The need for support from Westminster	45
Public Support and Stakeholders	51
The need for public support	51
Forming an engaging narrative	51
Meeting stakeholders concerns	52
Project Planning and Delivery	59
Strategic misrepresentation	59
Sharp and arbitrary deadlines	61
Weak central oversight and costing information	62
General Reflections	66
Summary of Recommendations	71
Conclusion	76
Bibliography	78

Executive Summary

Scope and Purpose

This report examines how political dynamics and stakeholder interests in Westminster shape major public infrastructure projects in the UK. Unlike standard project management challenges, public projects operate in a unique political realm with its own rules and power structures. The study explores how formal decision-making and informal factors (such as individual political influence and a project's regional importance) affect every stage from project planning to delivery. It draws on extensive literature, case studies, interviews, and a parliamentary survey to understand these influences and propose practical reforms. Ultimately, the report aims to improve how government handles the politics of projects, ensuring that vital infrastructure investments deliver their full value to the public.

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Thematic Analysis of Key Challenges

The report identifies several recurring challenges in the political and managerial environment for major projects, grouped into four themes:

1. Project Appraisal and Business Case

How projects are evaluated at the outset can skew which initiatives get funded. Current Treasury appraisal methods (the Green Book guidelines) are seen as overly focused on narrow economic cost-benefit analysis, often over-emphasising quantifiable economic value at the expense of wider social, environmental, or long-term benefits.

2. Interactions with Westminster (Politics and Governance)

Major projects must navigate the shifting currents of politics. On one hand, strong political sponsorship is often crucial for a project's survival – energetic ministers or mayors who champion a scheme can push it through approvals and keep it on track. On the other hand, political interference can be damaging when short-term or parochial interests intrude on sound project planning. Additionally, a cultural tendency toward “gold-plating” projects is noted: politicians and officials often seek to build the “best in the world,” adding scope or specifications that go beyond core requirements. Without clearer limits, ambition for its own sake can inflate budgets and delay delivery.

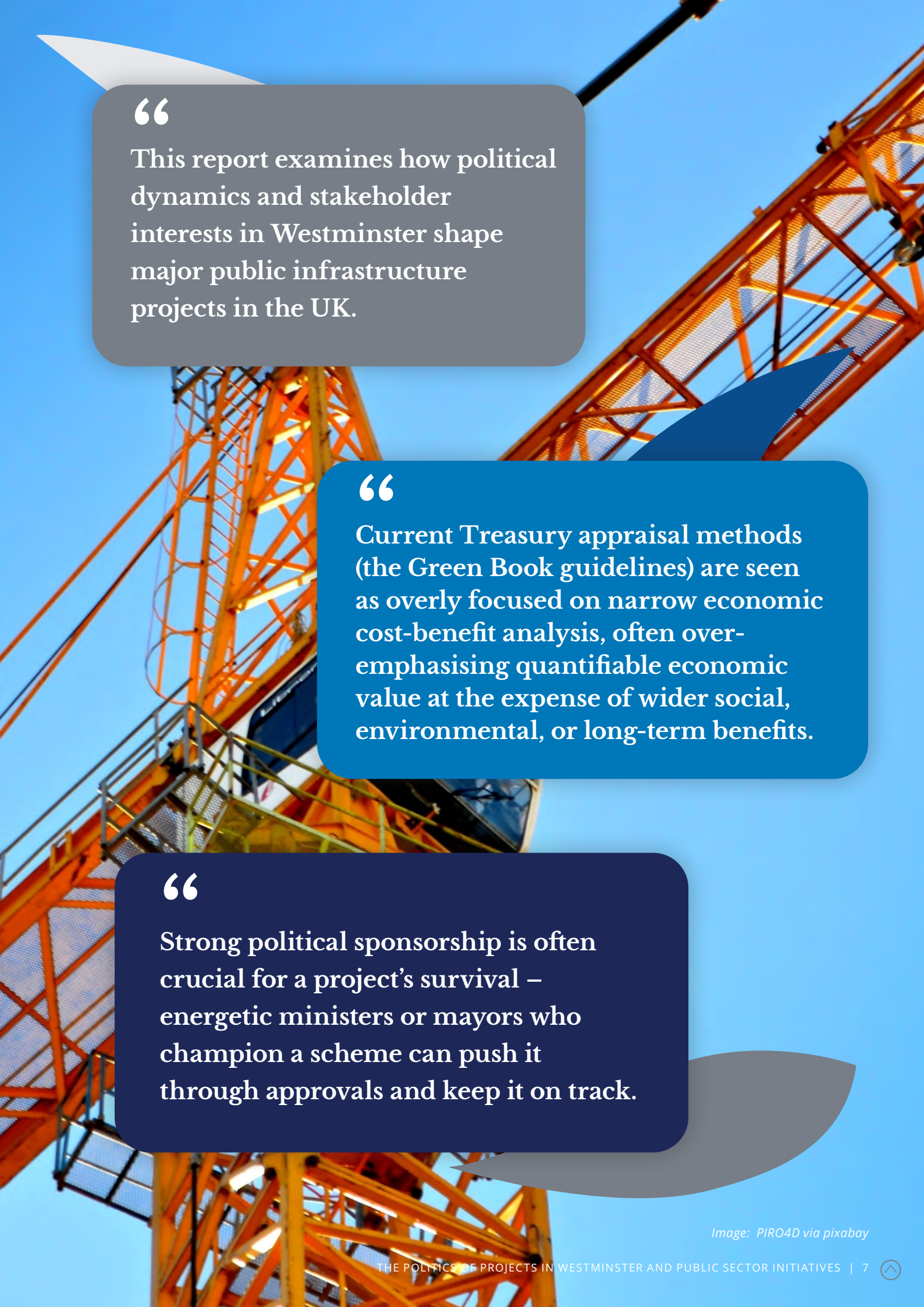
3. Public Support and Stakeholder Engagement

Infrastructure projects cannot succeed without broad stakeholder buy-in. Gaining and maintaining public support is essential to withstand the long timelines and inevitable disruptions. The UK's planning system gives local communities and interest groups numerous avenues to voice concerns – which, if unmanaged, can lead to delays or legal challenges. The report notes that governments have often delayed contentious projects rather than confront local opposition head-on. Better practice, as seen in other countries, is to convene structured forums early, where affected groups can discuss options and trade-offs in a transparent way. The political calculus of projects must include winning hearts and minds: from local residents up to national media, stakeholder trust and understanding can make the difference between a project that falters and one that endures.

4. Project Delivery and Execution

Once a project is approved, sustaining good management through to delivery is another challenge rife with political implications. A common issue is over-optimistic planning – timelines and budgets that prove unrealistic. This can stem from genuine optimism bias or deliberate “strategic misrepresentation”: proponents low-ball costs or overstate benefits to secure approval in a competitive funding environment. This leads to painful reckonings later, with cost overruns, schedule slips, and public backlash. Another delivery challenge is the setting of fixed deadlines that are politically driven rather than reality based. Hard end-dates are tempting to politicians, but if misaligned with project complexity, they can do harm. Finally, the report highlights gaps in central oversight and knowledge sharing during project delivery.

With so many actors (departments, contractors, local bodies), it is easy for accountability to diffuse. In the HS2 case, even bodies created to guide infrastructure (the National Infrastructure Commission and Infrastructure and Projects Authority) were sidelined when key decisions were made. This suggests that stronger institutional mechanisms are needed to monitor progress, enforce realistic forecasts, and adjust course when political winds change. Robust monitoring and evaluation from start to finish – and independent scrutiny such as parliamentary oversight – are critical to ensure projects stay on track and lessons from one project inform others.



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Image: PIRO4D via pixabay





Image: GNEPPHOTO via Canva

Policy Recommendations

Drawing on the findings, the report sets out a series of actionable recommendations to improve the political and managerial practices around public infrastructure projects. These recommendations are grouped by theme:

Reforming Project Appraisal

The government should overhaul how it appraises and selects major projects. Key proposals include establishing an accountability framework to keep the Treasury's Green Book methodology under continuous review so that it no longer over-prioritises short-term economic metrics. Appraisals must systematically factor in social, environmental and long-term impacts. To counter regional bias, the report recommends embedding "place-based" criteria at the heart of investment decisions – in practice, a set of standards ensuring that community benefits and levelling-up objectives carry weight alongside benefit-cost ratios.

A related recommendation is for an independent review of new infrastructure funding programs (such as the "Transport for City Regions" fund) to evaluate whether they are truly helping to redress regional imbalances. Lastly, every department should re-examine its project appraisal criteria and models to simplify outdated methodologies and remove any implicit biases. By modernising appraisal tools (for example, reducing reliance on stale indicators like journey-time savings), policymakers can ensure a broader value-for-money test that identifies projects with the greatest overall benefit, not just the easiest to quantify.

Strengthening Westminster Governance

To strike the right balance between political leadership and project stability, the report calls for clearer rules and roles in decision-making. It suggests formal guidelines to limit ad hoc political interference – for instance, departmental protocols so that individual MPs cannot overturn prioritisation decisions with behind-the-scenes lobbying. Once a project is agreed and announced, there should be firmer discipline that it will not be arbitrarily reopened or cancelled due to political pressure. At the same time, positive political support should be institutionalised: each major project of national significance ought to have a designated "guardian angel" minister responsible from inception to completion. Assigning a single senior minister as the consistent champion would maintain momentum and accountability even as governments and ministers change.

The newly formed National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA) should be empowered as an independent gatekeeper for major projects – the recommendation is to give NISTA a formal "gateway" review role for all major project business cases and announcements, ensuring that political commitments are vetted for realism before they are made public.

Additionally, the report advocates steps to depoliticise critical infrastructure decisions: one bold suggestion is for the government to collaborate with opposition parties on a long-term, cross-party priority project list that would be shielded from election-cycle politics. By securing broad political agreement on essential projects (similar to national infrastructure consensus in other countries), the UK could prevent projects of strategic importance from becoming political footballs subject to reversals with each administration.

Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement and Planning Processes

To build public support and deliver projects faster, several recommendations focus on improving the planning and engagement phase. The government is urged to streamline consent procedures for major projects while upholding robust consultation. This includes following through on proposed reforms to the NSIP regime and the Hybrid Bill process – essentially simplifying and accelerating planning approvals for nationally significant projects.

A forthcoming Planning and Infrastructure Bill is cited as an opportunity to enact these changes, and the report stresses it should be passed expediently (with minimal dilution) to start reducing unnecessary delays. Faster decisions, however, must not sideline communities: the report emphasizes that even in a quicker process, stakeholder concerns need to be addressed as early as possible.

This could involve more front-loaded consultations and improved communication of how local feedback is used. Indeed, one recommendation is that every major project be required to develop a clear public narrative and rationale at the outset. By mandating a transparent explanation of why a project is being pursued (in plain language and with evidence of its benefits), the government can increase public understanding and trust from day one.

In tandem, officials must ensure that stakeholder engagement is not just a formality: the report recommends strengthening practices to listen to and mitigate local concerns in the initial design phase itself. By doing so, objections can be resolved before they escalate into political controversies or legal challenges.

In summary, the planning system should be reformed to be swifter and more predictable for infrastructure deemed in the national interest, while also requiring project teams to actively earn public support through openness and early engagement.

Improving Project Delivery and Oversight

To prevent failures in execution, the report advises a suite of measures to foster realism, transparency, and accountability during delivery. Tackling the issue of optimism bias and misrepresentation, it calls for systematic learning from past projects – for example, an Evaluation Task Force should review the last decade of major projects to identify patterns of overstated benefits or understated costs. Lessons from these audits can inform new guidelines to discourage overly rosy forecasts.

In a related vein, all announced timelines for large projects should undergo rigorous stress-testing to ensure schedules are achievable and not mere political wishful thinking. If a proposed deadline cannot survive a stress-test (accounting for complex integration, testing, and potential delays), it should be adjusted before commitments are made public.

The report also highlights the importance of continuous monitoring: it recommends that every major project implement a robust monitoring and evaluation framework at inception, so that progress and risks are objectively tracked throughout the project lifecycle.

This would enable earlier warnings and course-corrections, rather than allowing issues to compound.

Strengthening independent oversight is another pillar of the recommendations. Parliament should play a greater role – the report suggests establishing a dedicated Select Committee on Infrastructure to scrutinise major projects, their business cases, and their delivery performance in real time. Such a committee would increase transparency and keep political attention on solving problems (rather than ignoring them until crises erupt).

Furthermore, the institutional capacity at the center of government needs bolstering: the new NISTA should be made a fully autonomous body (a non-departmental public body) rather than a mere unit within the Treasury or Cabinet Office. With more independence, NISTA can provide unbiased expert assessments of projects and enforce high standards without being overruled by short-term political considerations.

Finally, to ensure continuity, the report encourages cross-government commitment to insulating critical projects from abrupt policy shifts – echoing the earlier call for cross-party agreements and adding that once a project is underway with public funds, the default should be to see it through barring truly fundamental changes in circumstances.

Image: JU.STOCKER via Canva



Conclusion

The politics of projects in the UK public sector can determine whether multi-billion-pound infrastructure initiatives thrive or fail. As this report makes clear, improving political and managerial practices is not a technocratic nicety but a strategic necessity.

Britain is embarking on an unprecedented infrastructure investment drive, and the stakes are high: these projects are central to economic vibrancy and public welfare, yet all too often their full value is lost to delays, cost overruns, or cancellations born of political missteps.

By adopting the recommendations in this report – from smarter appraisal and depoliticised decision-making to stronger stakeholder engagement and oversight – the Government and Civil Service can significantly increase the chances of delivering successful, value-for-money infrastructure.

In turn, this will bolster public trust and ensure that the enormous costs of major projects translate into tangible benefits across the UK.

The message of the report is ultimately an optimistic one:

with better management of the political dynamics, Britain can overcome the familiar pitfalls and deliver the infrastructure that its citizens need for the future.



Image: Patrice Werner via Pexels





Introduction

The core purpose of this project is to identify, analyse and explain the key political and stakeholder influences within Westminster and public sector projects. It looks at the role of political dynamics such as power structures, negotiation, criteria and rationale for decision-making. It also considers how these dynamics impact on project planning, execution and delivery, as well as the less formal influences – political, personal and spatial.

This study analyses the impact of government stakeholders, civil service departments and external political entities on project management, as well as on the earlier scoping, development and planning processes for projects. It assesses the negotiation practices that public sector managers employ to deal with competing interests, as well as some of the management strategies employed that reflect the unique landscape of Westminster and the public sector.

The context is the broad world of project management and many of the skills involved in this world are both universal and transferable. However, the world of political dynamics within which public sector projects are determined is very different. It utilises a unique framework of rules and decision-making in each of the stages of the process. As a result, the key focus of this study is this political realm within which all such public sector projects are ultimately determined and the political dynamics that are at play within it.



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(...) It examines the challenges confronting project professionals which affect project outcomes and will primarily draw attention to the political dynamics underlying these challenges.

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These issues are examined through four key dimensions – appraisal problems, interactions with Westminster, public support and stakeholders and project planning and delivery.

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The first criticism is that rather than reflecting an entirely neutral calculation on the value of projects, it contains an inbuilt bias that overemphasises the economic value of the project to the detriment of other pressing concerns – such as the social, environmental or cultural consequences or impact of a project.

Image: Iurii Laimin via Pexels



It looks at how these power dynamics influence public project decisions among MPs, civil servants and external stakeholders. It further considers how political, and stakeholder interests shape the planning and delivery of Westminster projects and what negotiation practices are essential in such a high stakes politically driven realm.

This political realm is particularly sensitive to informal and well as formal processes and many of the key participants – political and non-political – are keenly aware of this. The study is clear that the dynamic between politicians, civil servants and other concerned parties is not static but rather organic and depends on a range of differing factors. It follows that understanding these factors is central to success in project management.

The factors also need to be looked at within the context of the informal dimensions mentioned earlier – the political, the personal and the spatial. They essentially relate to the concepts of stakeholder power [personal], legitimacy [political] and proximity [spatial] in the literature and are inextricably interwoven, especially for politicians (Yang et al 2014, 75-77).

The personal relates to issues specific to the politician such as their experience; their proximity to the Prime Minister of the day; the longevity of their ministerial career and potential future prospects; how long they had been an MP; how safe or otherwise their seats is; and how influential they are as individuals within their party.

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The University College London Omega Team into Transport Megaprojects argued that the appraisal process should involve giving more thought to the project's environmental impact, sustainability and its ability to restructure or regenerate areas or sectors of the economy.

(Omega Centre 2012, 16)

The other more informal political dynamic at play was found to be the spatial dimension. Simply put, this dynamic concerns the proximity and the nature of the project such as whether it is local, regional or national in importance; whether the party of government had committed to it in its manifesto; whether it is a particular pet of significant and powerful MPs; whether it is viewed as essential for economic or wider political reasons; or whether or not its funding means other projects will be displaced.

There is a critical gap in our understanding of how these political structures and dynamics impact on each element of the process of the public sector projects being assessed, on decision-making and on funding through to implementation.



Image: Midjourney

After a brief consideration of the background and context of infrastructure and politics, it presents a brief summary of two of the most significant infrastructure projects in recent times in the UK – Crossrail and the Thames Tideway Tunnel. It considers how these two projects dealt with the issues under discussion in this study – particularly within the realm of political dynamics and stakeholder management.

Much of the relevant literature on project management, government influence and political decision making has been reviewed – but all through the prism of the political dynamics at play. A range of qualitative, non-attributable interviews with stakeholders who possess relevant experience in this area was carried out – and the analysis of these findings has again informed the overall recommendations. A survey of MPs and their teams was undertaken to assess their experiences of the dynamics at play in the field of public sector projects and an analysis of these findings has also influenced the final conclusions and recommendations.

The report concludes with recommendations that are both practicable and actionable suggesting how to navigate and perhaps overcome these challenges. These recommendations are underpinned by a detailed review of the literature, the analyses of the case studies, the stakeholder interviews and the survey of MPs and their teams.

It is essential that there is greater understanding about the politics of projects in Westminster. The public sector initiatives, not least the grand infrastructure projects involved, are central and vitally important to the vibrancy of the UK economy. The costs of these projects is enormous and all too often their value is not fully realised. This study offers some detailed well-founded and academically rigorous yet practical advice on how these issues might be more efficiently dealt with to the benefit of all concerned.



Background and Context

In June 2025, the Government launched ‘UK Infrastructure: A 10 Year Strategy’ (HM Treasury 2025), committing it to a minimum of £725bn of funding over the next decade. It defined infrastructure in the broadest terms including, amongst other things, housing, transport and water; energy, schools and hospitals; and essential maintenance, digital connectivity and flood resilience. It merged the existing organisations – the National Infrastructure Commission and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority – into one new body, the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA).

This new body was established to ‘develop and implement the government’s next infrastructure strategy, unlock private investment in infrastructure and streamline planning to speed up the consenting process for major projects’ (Ibid, p.6).

It will be afforded a significant role in ‘advising ministers on the go/no-go decisions for major projects and infrastructure [and] will help government understand if a project has been properly designed, supply chain able to deliver on time and budget and if the financing has been adequately put together’ (Ibid, 1). Crucially too, NISTA was to be afforded a role on social infrastructure – a role that the NIC did not have. Indeed, arguably this was the first time that there was to be a government-wide social infrastructure strategy (Ibid, 11-12; Interview 2025).

Each of these issues – strategy, investment and planning – had been previously identified as impediments to progress, and this strategy represented the latest attempt to address agreed concerns (Atkins et al 2018; Davies et al 2018; Kidney Bishop et al 2017; Slade et al 2017). The Government also announced a ‘plan for change’ that, it suggested, would put the country on track for a ‘decade of national renewal’.

It lamented infrastructure investment in the past which it declared to have been ‘too erratic and too low in the UK’ hampering productivity and wages and making delivery slow and costly’ (HM Treasury 2025, 3). The promise was that the Government would develop more coordination across sectors and between government and delivery partners, another favourite recommendation from past studies.

Within each area of overall potential funding for a large scheme there would be a plethora of projects that would need stakeholder, project managers and skills teams. Each of these projects would require key decisions to be made from the routine to the transformational. There would be stakeholders to satisfy from the civic to the political. All of these decisions would take place in the political realm where key political dynamics would dominate – and it is these that need to be more fully understood. The case studies that follow are essentially successful projects, but they highlight the political dynamics at play.



Image: microgen via Getty Images Pro





Case Study

Crossrail

Crossrail is an east-west combined metro/suburban rail system running under London, linking Reading in the west with Shenfield in the east. It is a high-frequency hybrid commuter rail and rapid transit system, akin to the Réseau express régional (RER) in Paris or the S-Bahn in German cities.

The APM states that the aspiration to 'create an east-west railway corridor across London was first mooted in the first half of the 19th century, as a means of connecting the canals of the Paddington basin to the docks in the Thames Estuary in the east' (APM 2024). At the time, of course, canals and waterways were central strategic transport routes and the plan made sense but did not proceed.

The idea of a new east-west line underground was suggested in the Abercrombie Report in 1943 but was never advanced (Abercrombie 1944). It existed in various forms in the 70s/80s but not with any real seriousness, notwithstanding the success of the two RER lines in Paris and even though it had continued political support from all parties. The latest attempt to progress it was started in 1989 but abandoned by the Government in 1996.

In 2000, the new Labour Government asked the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) to conduct a study on passenger capacity in London. The SRA formed a joint venture company with Transport for London (TfL) called Cross London Rail Links Ltd (CLRLL). They submitted a final business case for what became known as 'Crossrail' in 2003 (Commons Library Research Paper 2005).

The Government responded to the business case in September 2003 by asking Adrian Montague to lead an 'expert review team' for the project. Montague was well qualified to do this as he was the deputy Chair of Network Rail, the Chair of British Energy and a former head of Her Majesty's Treasury's private finance taskforce.

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The Elizabeth line will boost the UK economy by an expected

£42bn.

DURING CONSTRUCTION:

62% contracts outside London

55K new jobs

1000 apprenticeships

He had 'enormous experience in both railway projects and corporate finance' and was thus 'ideally suited to this important task' (House of Commons Debates 2003).

This key development in the project coincided with the bidding process for another huge infrastructure process – London's bid for the Olympics – which had to be in by July 2003. Crucially, even with cross-party support for both projects, the then Secretary of State for Transport, Alistair Darling, emphasised that Crossrail was 'never going to be in place for the Olympics'. This was made clear when it was decided to bid for the games (BBC News 2003).

There were some disingenuous suggestions that insisted at least some of the line could be folded into the Olympic bid, but Darling was clear this was not possible (London Assembly 2003). Arguably, the decoupling of the two projects played an important role in the success of both – it took the political pressure off the Olympic bid to include Crossrail at all costs, and it took political pressure off the Crossrail project to adhere to unrealistic and impractical deadlines that have plagued other major projects such as HS2 (National Audit Office 2020, 2023; Institute of Civil Engineers 2024).

The Montague Review reported in July 2004 and whilst saying that there were no pivotal problems with the business case, ‘there remained a large number of concerns that create significant uncertainty’ (Department for Transport 2004). This could have ended the project, but it did not. Darling concluded nonetheless that although ‘further work needed to be done to develop a funding solution,’ the Government would introduce a Hybrid Bill ‘at the earliest opportunity to take the powers necessary for Crossrail to be built (House of Commons Debates 2004). It needed a hybrid bill because it impacted both private individuals as well as the general public (Commons Briefing Paper 2018).

The Hybrid Bill contained the authorisation of works necessary to build Crossrail and associated matters, including the acquisition of land and interests in land necessary; the establishment of a planning and heritage regime for the works; application of existing railway and other miscellaneous legislation to Crossrail; the handover by transfer scheme of property, rights and liabilities from relevant authorities to nominated undertakers; and the devolution of control of the Crossrail project to the Greater London Authority, or Transport for London or a combination of the two (UK Parliament 2008).

Political insiders suggest that the utilisation of the hybrid bill process was central to the eventual success of the project. It gave a focal point for all aspects of the planning and route definition process – the playground for political dynamics in the regular planning process. Whilst it must have been a tortuous task for the MPs on the bill as it was in the committee for 21 months and it took almost two years to pass its Commons stages and six months to pass its Lords stages, it succeeded. The Bill received Royal Assent on 22 July 2008.

Throughout both its successful process and its previous abortive starts, as a major infrastructure project Crossrail commanded the overwhelming political support of the main parties with the only real issues being the Olympics, funding and the route. As indicated, Alistair Darling quashed any discussion of the vexed issue of whether or not it would form part of an Olympic bid. Funding remained an issue, but the Government was committed to the project proceeding and the route was finally determined by the hybrid bill process.

So, unusually for a major infrastructure project, there was a good deal of consensus and commitment to its progress. Nonetheless, this did not prevent another key political player – the civil service - from trying to, depending on one’s view, either ‘interfere’ in a political process or ‘offer independent advice’ on a significant project.

It was reported that one of the first issues presented to Alistair Darling when he moved from the Department of Transport to become the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 2007 was a report that suggested that support for Crossrail should be withdrawn immediately, and the project scrapped (Interview 2025).

It was pointed out to the civil servants that Crossrail had been agreed in full by the previous Secretary of State for Transport who happened now to be the Chancellor of the Exchequer and that the project was fully endorsed by the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer who happened now to be the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown.

It is rumoured that civil servants presented the same case to George Osborne when he succeeded Darling as Chancellor in 2010. Later in a 2016 speech, Osborne said that ‘... in my first week in office I rejected the Treasury’s proposal that we shouldn’t go ahead with the Crossrail project’ (Centre for Policy Studies 2016). Clearly then, not all political dynamics come from politicians.

Unusually for a major infrastructure project, the final implemented scheme is very close to that passed at Royal Assent for the Crossrail Act in 2008 (Association for Project Management 2024). It runs for more than 100km, including 42km of new tunnels beneath London and 20 new underground structures, beneath one of the oldest and most populated cities in the world. It has been widely celebrated as a major feat of engineering. Passenger services on the Central Section began on 24 May 2022 and the full service was introduced by May 2023.

There were some difficulties along the way. The Central Section, almost entirely underground between Paddington and Abbey Wood, was scheduled to open in December 2018, but in August, just four months before the long-planned opening date, it was announced that the opening would be delayed. This came as a real shock to all stakeholders (London Assembly 2018). The level of support for the project at national level and the political commitment on all sides meant that the project overcame the criticism that followed.

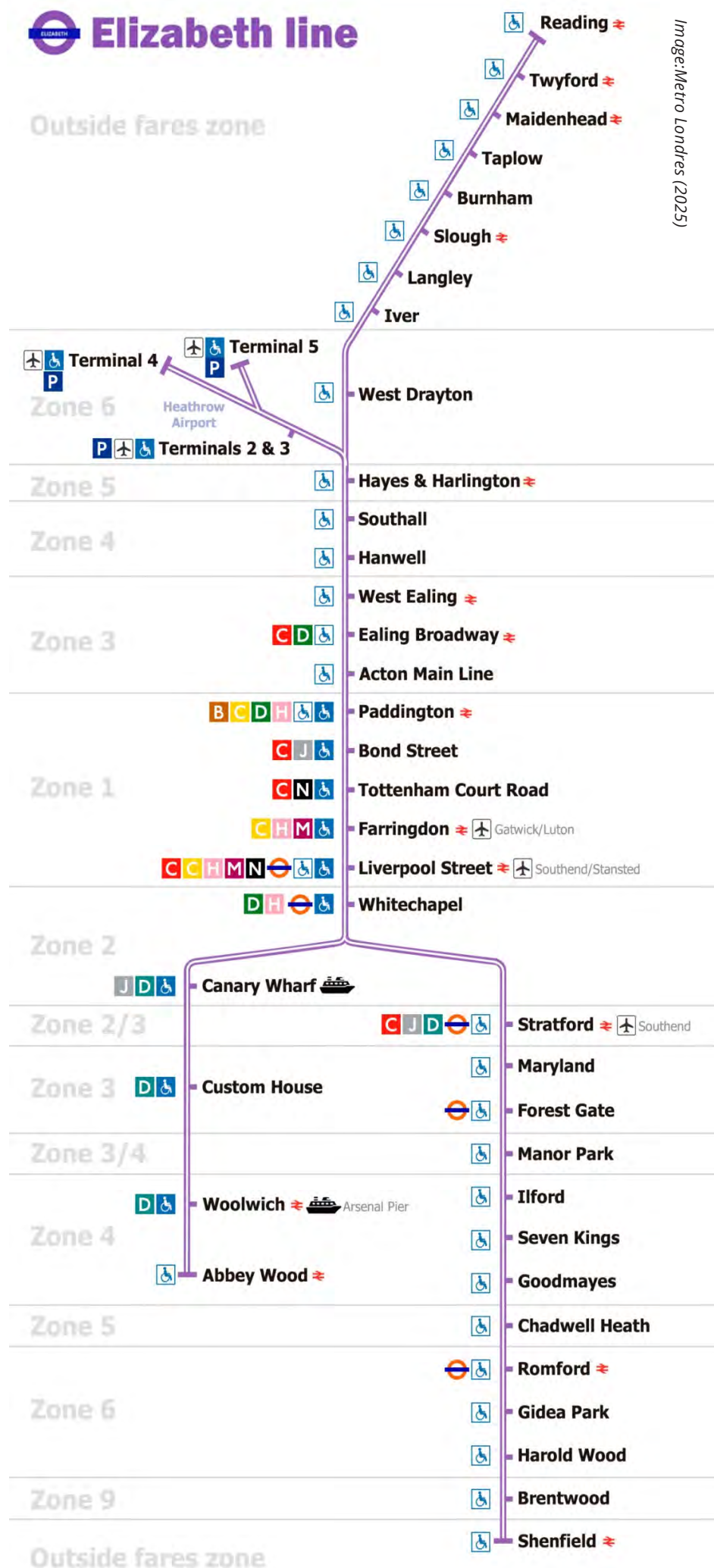


Image: Metro Londres (2025)

Notwithstanding this support, it was also important that the key supporters were not passive – they had committed resources as well as support. If it were ever a doubt or question mark over the completion of Crossrail, all the key stakeholders and supporters – from the British Airports Authority to the Canary Wharf Group and from the City of London to Transport for London and Berkely Homes – would all have rushed to consult lawyers to pursue the Government (Interview 2025). Happily, this did not happen. However, it did create a hiatus in the progress made on the project. (Association of Project Management 2024)

The line partially opened on 24 May 2022 serving new stations between Paddington and Abbey Wood, and then in November 2022 the partial service was extended by subsequently connecting Reading [an addition to the original route but presciently safeguarded just in case] and Heathrow with Shenfield and Abbey Wood. It was not until May 2023 that the full route with a peak service of 24 trains per hour opened with services between Heathrow and both Abbey Wood and Shenfield; and between Reading and Abbey Wood.

By any measure, Crossrail may be considered a success. As the APM report makes clear after ‘13 years of construction’ it provides not only a lasting legacy to the UK but much more (Association for Project Management 2024). The report states that the ‘Elizabeth line will boost the UK economy by an expected £42bn. Through construction, Crossrail awarded 62% of its contracts to firms outside London, and created 55,000 new jobs and 1,000 apprenticeships, ensuring that the benefits of this major project, at one point the largest in Europe, were spread across the country. To date, the Elizabeth Line has run well with limited disruption and is clearly a project of significant national importance. There has also been a clear return on investment and a degree of major national benefits.

Unlike the DLR, which was expanded as part of the 2012 Olympic transport legacy (pictured), Crossrail was deliberately decoupled from the Games to avoid unrealistic deadlines.

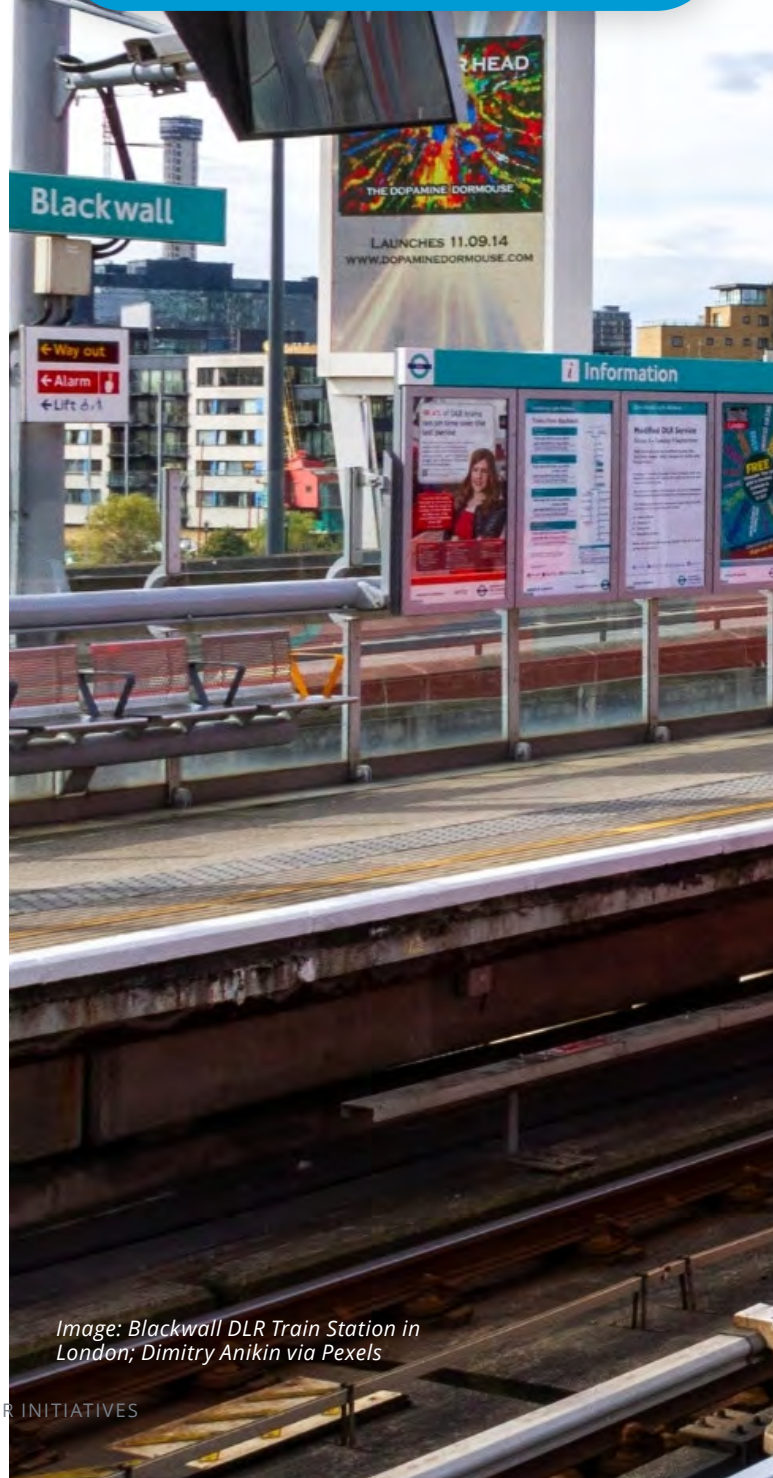


Image: Blackwall DLR Train Station in London; Dimitry Anikin via Pexels





Case Study

Thames Tideway

The Thames Tideway Tunnel is a £5bn super sewer in London designed to reduce the amount of raw sewage that flows into the river. The new tunnelling infrastructure is designed to intercept, store and transfer sewage away from the River Thames, and delivers on environmental benefits as well as protecting the river from pollution. The tunnel is 25km long and has a diameter of 7.2m and diverts 34 of the most polluting sewage outflows that were previously discharging into the Thames. It can store 1.6m cubic metres of wastewater, equal to 600 Olympic swimming pools. More than 25,000 people have been involved in the construction of the project. By any token, this is a major infrastructure project (BBC News 2024).

Some 150 years ago, Sir Joseph Bazalgette created parks and embankments as part of his work to create London's Victorian sewer system. Tideway was inspired by this work and Bazalgette's vision. As part of the project, there are new riverside open spaces that make up three acres (1.2 hectares) of new land along the River Thames. These cover the underground infrastructure and are also home to Tideway's public art programme. The programme has been commissioned specifically for the Tideway project and to celebrate London's rich heritage.

The project was classified as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) in September 2014, so permission had to be given by the Secretaries of State, not local councils. This meant that much of the political dynamics around planning permissions and the influence of stakeholders were managed through a clearly defined process.

As part of the planning consent, Tideway entered a section 106 legal agreement under the Town and Country Planning Act with 13 local borough councils, the City of London and the London Legacy Development Corporation to lessen the impact of the construction on the community (Thames Tideway Tunnel 2014). The s.106 agreements focused on mitigation of the impact of construction as well as a range of other issues concerning the communities affected. This included matters such as employment and skills; local schools and education; transport; landscaping and local amenity; and council resourcing.

This did not mean, however, that there was an absence of contention in each of the boroughs concerned. Rather, most of the issues that were raised were able to be much more contained and focussed. Certainly, more so than they would have been had been had planning permission needed to be secured in 13 or more separate planning jurisdictions.

For many, the key bone of contention was not at this stage in the process but in the very early developmental stages. Arguably, as the Institute for Government remarked, the boundaries of the analysis for the project were 'set quickly and narrowly in the early options phase and decision makers later did not return to alternative solutions despite cost reductions over the decision-making life cycle' (Institute for Government 2017, 14).

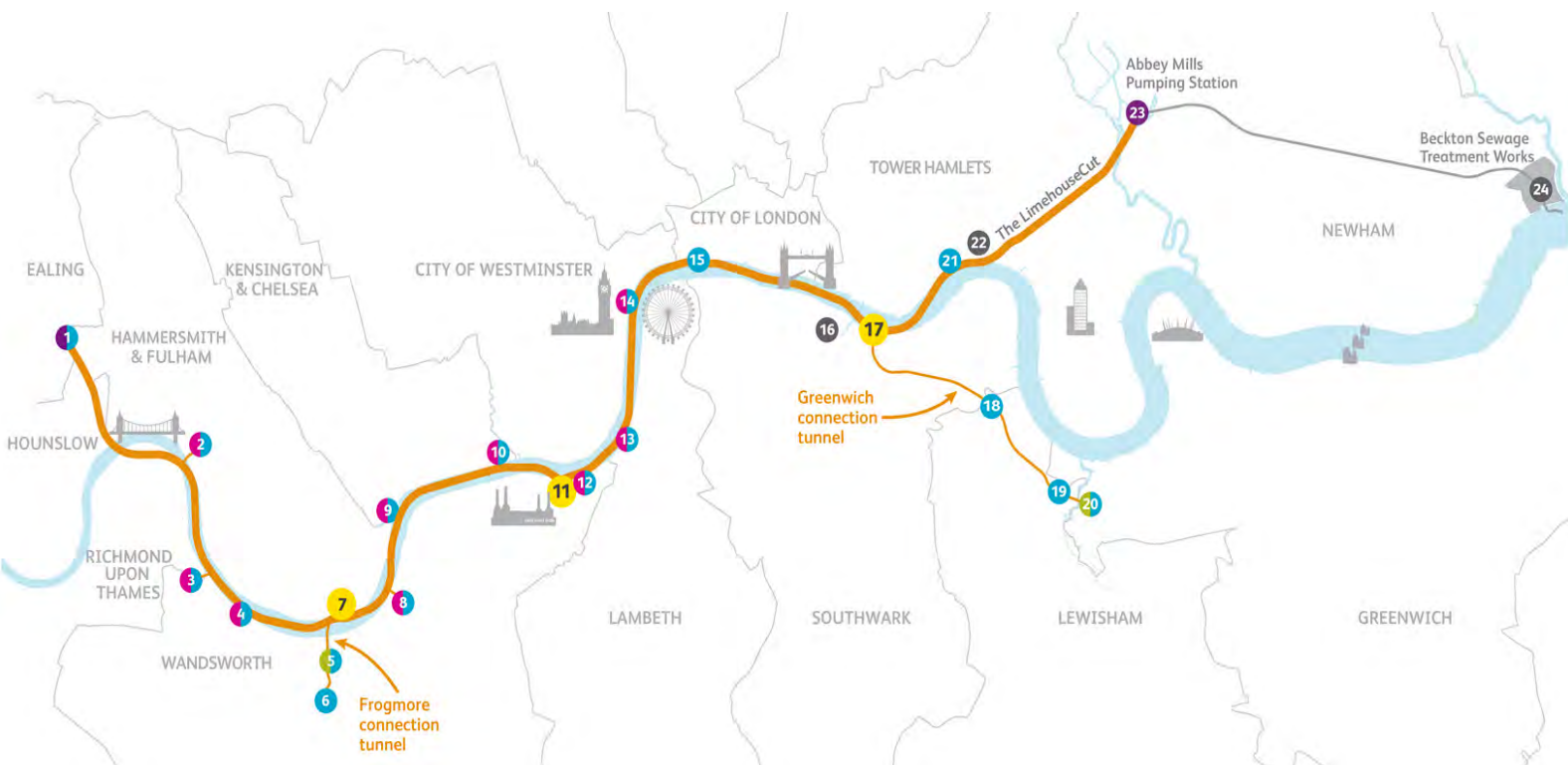


Image: Construction Enquirer, 2014

At the early stages of development, many of the key stakeholders sought alternatives but the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) seemed set on the tunnel solution. The local councils affected drew up a commission under Lord Selbourne to look at alternatives on the basis that the tunnel solution would have a significant detrimental impact on the environment (Thames Tunnel Commission 2011; London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham 2011).

There could also have been greater political controversy because of the unique funding scheme. The project was initiated with a £1.3bn equity investment and additional funds were raised through debt and green bonds, with Allianz being the largest shareholder. The model allowed investors to provide low-cost capital thus reducing the cost to consumers.

It was estimated that the funding of the project would add £70-80 to the annual bills of Thames Water customers but it was also thought that it might turn out to be as little as £20-25 (ITN 2025). The Institute for Government considered that 'Tideway represents a major step forward in the public sector's understanding and handling of risk in comparison to the wholesale risk transfer of earlier projects' (Institute for Government 2017, 23; National Audit Office 2017).

A key part of the funding model though was the Government Support Package (GSP) which effectively committed the Government to bearing the risk beyond a set threshold. Although it maintained the right to discontinue the project for whatever reason, the shareholders would still get their return. Happily, things did not turn out this way, but the existence of the GSP was central to the confidence of investors and shareholders to take part.

Disappointingly after such a successful use of the funding model, the reaction from some Treasury officials was to the effect that they would make sure that it was 'the last bloody time we use GSP' – thus missing the entire point as to why the funding model worked (Interview 2025). The government potentially absorbing the risk in the event of failure was central to model's success. For many this went to the heart of the ongoing naivety of some in Treasury that whatever the model, there was always going to be a need for risk-protection by government.

One key political difficulty for the project was the reputational integrity of Thames Water itself. Tideway was a separate entity, but it was inextricably linked with Thames Water which was struggling under almost £20bn of debt and was resisting the need for, potentially, some form of government intervention.



Image: London Tideway project near Blackfriars bridge, aerial view; Steve Bateman via Getty Images

Tideway explained that it ‘works closely with, but is separate from, Thames Water, which is a key project stakeholder having originally set out the feasibility and planning case for the project and as the operator of London’s waste-water network.’ Tideway continued saying that ‘other key project stakeholders include government (through DEFRA), the regulator Ofwat and the Environment Agency’ (Thames Tideway 2025).

Thus, although there was a potential for Tideway to experience the wrong kind of political dynamics by association, by the time the project was set for construction these areas of contention were in the past and the project worked with stakeholders to see the project to fruition.

Tideway suggests that as an ‘independent infrastructure company, conceived and funded through an innovative model that brings together private capital investment, regulatory oversight and Government contingency support,’ it could provide a model for the future delivery of major projects (Thames Tideway 2025). This is a claim worthy of further investigation.

The next section looks at the prevailing literature in the area of project management that is relevant to our understanding of the importance of political dynamics. It concentrates particularly on the issues that are of most importance and interest in the world of political dynamics. These core issues can be grouped under four headings: problems appraising projects; interactions with Westminster; public support and stakeholders; and project planning and delivery.



Image: Getty Images Signature

The Politics of Projects – Key Issues

There is a vast amount of literature written on project management of UK infrastructure projects. This literature review does not deal with the trends, debates or theoretical approaches in project management generally. Instead, it examines the challenges confronting project professionals which affect project outcomes and will primarily draw attention to the political dynamics underlying these challenges.

After briefly introducing the field of project management, these issues are examined through four key dimensions – appraisal problems, interactions with Westminster, public support and stakeholders and project planning and delivery. It begins by looking at problems with the methodology used to appraise infrastructure projects. It then recounts the difficulties that project professionals face when interacting with Westminster and the political realm.

The next section explains the necessity to gain public support and difficulty managing stakeholders, whilst the final part examines some of the challenges and mistakes made in project planning and delivery.

Introduction to project management literature

There are four broad kinds of literature in the field of project management for infrastructure projects (though there is considerable overlap between them).

Firstly, largely produced by professional associations like the Association for Project Management (APM), there are handbooks and technical manuals that present an account of best practice. These works were instrumental in formalising the field providing a systematic body of knowledge (PMI 1987; PMI 2008; IPMA 2006; APM 2006). These institutions also produce regular news and articles from project management experts, provide training, certifications/qualifications and consultancy support.

The second kind of literature develops theories and ideas to innovate on best practice in the area of project management. These include, for example, agile project management theory (Schwaber 2004; Sutherland & Sutherland 2014; Gannon 2013) and rethinking aspects of project management (Winter et al 2006).

Thirdly, with the formalisation of project management as a sub-discipline, there have been works explaining the history of the field and the development of theoretical approaches (Morris et al 2011; Turner and Müller 2003).



Lastly, and most importantly for this project, there are empirical case studies and reports of existing infrastructure projects. By the late twentieth century, there developed a significant literature on major projects (Millar & Lessard 2001; Flyvbjerg et al 2003; Morris & Hough 1987; Morris & Pinto 2004) and more recently, there has been more analysis so-called “megaprojects” (projects that cost \$1bn or more) (Egan 1998).

Similarly, there are reports that review individual projects, which are especially relevant if things have gone wrong. More often than not, these would be presented by government or parliamentary organisations such as the National Audit Office or the Public Account Committee; or a range of non-government organisations and think tanks. Finally, there are specifically focused studies into individual projects by academics or professionals (Jennings 2012; Wolmar 2018; Stride 2019; James 2017).

Each of these areas is very useful in informing and increasing our knowledge of project management but only some of the areas are centrally important to explaining the importance of political dynamics. The focal point of the review and the subsequent recommendations will be the four key themes of appraisal, interactions, managing stakeholders and project planning and delivery. There are also sub-themes to consider in each theme as indicated in the Figure One above.

Problems appraising projects

The over-emphasis on economic value in appraising projects

There are many criticisms of the way that the Treasury appraises the value of infrastructure projects. The Government core guidelines with which to assess projects are to be found in the Green Book, or more formally 'HM Treasury (2003). The Green Book: Appraisal and evaluation in central government.' This guides the way that government decision-makers and civil servants assess the benefits, costs and risks of infrastructure projects.

The first criticism is that rather than reflecting an entirely neutral calculation on the value of projects, it contains an inbuilt bias that overemphasises the economic value of the project to the detriment of other pressing concerns – such as the social, environmental or cultural consequences or impact of a project. This can undervalue other possible political or societal benefits such as environmental sustainability, benefits to the community or wellbeing and, further, takes no account of the potential benefits into the future if they cannot be measured and quantified exactly beyond asserting a 'public good.'

There have been numerous studies that have come to this conclusion. The University College London Omega Team into Transport Megaprojects argued that the appraisal process should involve giving more thought to the project's environmental impact, sustainability and its ability to restructure or regenerate areas or sectors of the economy (Omega Centre 2012, 16). They argue that not doing so can lead to decision-makers and politicians failing to take a holistic approach, focusing too heavily on short-term gains and unintended consequences (e.g. environmental detriment or long-term bad design) (Ibid 38).

Lord Adonis told the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee that when he was Transport Secretary, 'the theory was you agreed the ones with high cost-benefit ratios, and those with lower ones, you did not agree' and that this would give 'very high premium to journey time savings' (House of Commons Select Committee 2018). Concentrating on one factor like this can also cause difficulties when the narrative changes.

As will be evident, one of the failings politically of various high speed rail schemes was the dominance of one factor over others. Emphasising journey times over factors like connectivity to communities one minute and then shifting the focus to capacity in the next, makes an already sceptical audience even more sceptical. If factors like connectivity or capacity – or any number of social, cultural and environmental factors are important, then they should be included in any calculation of the costs and benefits of such schemes (Ibid). The National Capital Committee (NCC) argued that there was little evidence that natural capital was sufficiently accounted for in the appraisal process (NCC 2020).

In a report on the Green Book, the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) found that while the Treasury has well developed metrics for evaluating economic benefit, it has poorly crafted means of evaluating social benefit (ICE 2020, 5). The report argues that social value cannot be easily quantified and hence should be kept separate from economic analysis. The ICE, as well as the Resolution Foundation and the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR), have proposed widening the framework on which decisions are made to include environmental and other social benefits, increasing the importance of emissions reduction in appraisal and decision-making (ICE 2020, 7; IPPR 2020; Resolution Foundation 2020).

The IPPR argues that the Green Book should reflect the government's commitments at the Paris Agreement and their net-zero target. This means placing a greater weight on the environmental value of a project (IPPR 2020, 15). Arup likewise argued in favour of taking a "total value" approach which is better suited to capturing social value (Arup 2018).

Since 2003, The Treasury has acknowledged that all non-market societal benefits such as the environment should be factored in the appraisal calculation, and they have continued to update their approach over the years (HM Treasury 2020, 17-19; 2022, 73-84). However, the Treasury's own reviews have shown that they have consistently failed to achieve this.

A 2020 Treasury review of the Green Book found that there was an overreliance on the cost benefit ratios (BCRs) in determining the value of a project. [Bizarrely, BCR seems to be the preferred acronym here – as in benefit: cost ratio – while cost: benefit ratio prevails when the phrase is spelt out.]

The Treasury has dealt with this in part by changing the guidelines to stress the importance of the other benefits that a project might have (HM Treasury, 2020, 4; Ibid, 9-11). A subsequent review in 2025 found an ongoing overreliance on BCRs and the guidelines have been revised and strengthened once again (HM Treasury, 2025, 19-20). The review also found that there was insufficient emphasis on "place-based" business cases which assess other factors that are relevant to the community such as housing and transport as well as broader infrastructure concerns. (Ibid, 8).

The problem here is that nominally neutral metrics such as BCRs are used to filter and prioritise schemes and projects before they even get on to lists where there is a possibility that they might be in with a chance for serious consideration. Thus, projects that might have significant non-economic benefits rarely get to the starting line. In the case of the 2012 Olympic bid and Crossrail, both had enormous non-economic potential but were also in a fairly reasonable position in terms of BCRs.

They both needed significant political support from some serious political players to help their cause and see them through to implementation. Perhaps if judged solely on BCR or economic criteria, neither would have been built in the end.

Being skewed towards economic gains means that the current system has a bias towards quantifiable benefits, often missing out less tangible but real advantages. In his detailed account of the construction and delivery of Crossrail, Christian Wolmar pointed out that favouring projects with quantifiable benefits leads to poor outcomes such as prioritising car-based travel (Wolmar, 2018, 45). This is because it is easy to measure traffic reduction numbers and the flow of goods, making the benefits easy to calculate.

Meanwhile rail schemes, which have long-term environmental benefits, are more difficult to measure (Wolmar, 2018, 44). Likewise, in appraising the London 2012 Olympics, a report by Arup found that many of the benefits of the project could not easily be quantified such as the potential to regenerate worse off areas like the Lower Lee Valley (Arup, 2002, 11).

The Government has promised to take account of environmental concerns as it attempts to reform the planning process to make it 'fit for purpose' and better able to deliver the needs for growth in the economy. This balance between growth, build and environment needs to be taken seriously by politicians and government alike. It has made clear in its ten-year infrastructure strategy that it is providing £500 million over three years to deliver an environmental planning reform package. It indicates that such funding will 'speed up infrastructure and housing development by making it simpler for developers to meet their environmental obligations, without compromising on environmental improvement' (HM Treasury 2025, para6.9, 95).



Image: Tail Rail Bridge, Dundee, Scotland; lucentius via Getty Images
Signature

Regional bias in the location of projects

Another prominent criticism of the Green Book is that it has a regional bias towards developing infrastructure projects in already economically proficient areas (e.g. London and the South-East). Reports from Transport for the North and the ICE have come to this conclusion (Transport for the North 2020; ICE 2020, 4).

The result is that poorer areas are potentially neglected and not given the economic kickstart needed to realise their potential thereby entrenching regional inequalities. This was very much the driving philosophy behind the last government's 'levelling up' policy. It sought to 'end the geographical inequality which is such a striking feature of the UK. It needs to begin by improving economic dynamism and innovation to drive growth across the whole country' (HMSO 2022). Building such a redress of the imbalances is difficult to do and requires a sharp political will rather than just the development of neutral metrics of assessment.

Other reports found that there is a general lack of social or strategic planning to direct infrastructure projects towards poorer areas to combat inequalities. The Resolution Foundation, the IPPR and the ICE have all argued that the Government is missing a potentially green approach that can assist in combatting regional inequality (ICE 2020; IPPR 2020; Resolution Foundation 2020).

They argue that subsidies should be given to poorer regions, helping them contribute to net-zero through investment (ICE 2020 6; IPPR, 2020, 14, 69). In 2006, the Eddington Transport Study recommended that the appraisal process should use a Value-for-Money (VfM) measure rather than a cost-benefit analysis. The VfM measurement assesses a project's impact on GDP and environmental evaluations making it more suitable than the BCR (Eddington 2006, 61: House of Commons Library, 2010).

In the recent review of the Green Book, the Treasury concluded that there was insufficient evidence to prove that its analysis tacitly prioritises wealthier regions above others. However, it argued that the lack of transparency provided for why projects are chosen can give this impression (HM Treasury 2025, 21-22). The review set out guidelines to publish more business cases for a project to keep the public and key stakeholders informed on the benefits of the project will bring (Ibid, 9). It will also carry out further analysis on the role of BCR in the appraisal process (Ibid, 22).

Complex, outdated and manipulable methodology

Christian Wolmar argued that Department for Transport's Web Transport Analysis Guidance (WebTAG), which provides guidance on appraisal, is needlessly complex. The result is that insiders can become gatekeepers of the process, manipulating the system to get the answer clients/ consultants want (Wolmar 2018, 39-41).

Iain Docherty & Jon Shaw have likewise argued that the cost-benefit analysis is outdated, complex and relies on crude estimations (Docherty & Shaw 2014; Docherty & Shaw 2025, 290-1).

The 2025 review into the Green Book vindicates the idea that it is overly complex. It argued that there was a pressing need to radically simplify and shorten guidance (HM Treasury 2025a, 22-3). Another review in to how to do this is underway and will be published in 2026 (Ibid 23).

Lastly, over the years scholars have pointed to flaws within the existing methodology.

David Metz argued that existing methods of valuing infrastructure prioritised projects that reduced journey times rather than projects that involved changing the way that land is used (Metz 2017). This is a problem because changing the way the land is used produces more long-term gains.

Geurs et al. found that time-savings on journeys was not an effective measurement of welfare increases when there were no changes to transport policy or the use of land (Geurs et al. 2010). This means that existing methodology encourages short-term gains. Similarly, Venables et al. found that many benefits to users could be offset by landlords increasing rents and that this is not factored in (Venables et al 2004). The result is that tenants, a key stakeholder in infrastructure projects, are not correctly accounted for.

Recommendations

The over-emphasis of economic value

Although there have been attempts in the past to address the issues surrounding the over-emphasis on economic value, there remain issues around social, environmental and other key non-economic, non-market areas, that need to be addressed.

Recommendation

1

The development of an accountability framework across government that keeps the Green Book and broader project appraisal process under continuous review so that it does not overemphasise economic value.

Regional bias in the location of projects

The Treasury insists that there is insufficient evidence to support the claim of regional bias but agreed that there was an ongoing overreliance on cost-benefit analyses. Although the guidelines have been strengthened, there needs to be more emphasis on “place-based” business cases which assess other factors that are relevant to the community, such as housing and transport as well as broader infrastructure concerns. This needs to be analysed in full by the Place-Based Task Force and then by relevant Select Committee.

Recommendation

2

The establishment of full criteria for ensuring that place-based factors are at the centre of all government infrastructure decision making to avoid regional bias.

Regional bias in the location of projects

This funding is offered as one of the ways to both engage further with key local players including regional and city mayors and to address the context of regional bias. It is important to fully assess its efficacy in promoting and securing growth, planning reform and house building. The proposed Select Committee should assess new funding streams such as the 'Transport for City Regions' pot and evaluate how their contributions redress regional bias.

Recommendation

3

A detailed evaluation and analysis of the first rounds of 'transport for city regions' funding to see whether it has redressed concerns of regional bias.

Complex outdated and manipulable methodology

This is essential to avoid criteria being used simply because they have always been used in the past or used without stress testing whether or not they are appropriate. Examples of this would be the overreliance on journey time as a factor in Department for Transport projects, or the move straight to a tunnel solution rather than considering other drainage options in London by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Recommendation

4

There needs to be a department-by-department review of every single criterion used in assessing and appraising projects so that they are brought up-to-date and made consistent across government.



Image: UK Parliament



Interactions with Westminster

Political intervention

As is evident from the two case studies, there is a detail, logic and imperative to projects like Crossrail and The Thames Tideway Tunnel that means they have been broadly protected from overtly political decision-making. They were also both assisted by their planning stages being in what might be termed ‘mediated environments’ – the hybrid bill process for Crossrail and the NSIP/DCO process for the Thames Tideway Tunnel. This did not mean any less scrutiny than there would have been in the usual planning process, but both were determined within established and focussed frameworks with political support.

By contrast, the Stewart review found that political interference damaged the function of High-Speed Rail 2 (HS2). Sometimes this took the form of outright opposition, particularly from a range of the then government’s own backbenchers. Sometimes the interference was from the Government itself, unsure about the purpose of HS2 was and unclear about overarching narrative. Politicians changed the scope of HS2 by bringing it forward before there was an adequate design (Stewart, 2025, 6-7).

Heidi Alexander, the current Secretary of State for Transport minister, highlighted that politicians had unduly interfered in the project. The previous government had made promises to lower budget costs, which did not happen, and funded routes that were subsequently cancelled leading to increased costs in the long run (Department for Transport 2025).

This would have been an issue in normal circumstances but, when combined with both a change of government and a project that had never commanded the levels of support that a project like Crossrail had experienced, proved counterproductive.

For this reason, the UCL Omega team argued that projects be given ‘time to breathe’, so as to avoid politicians making hasty decisions when they try to speed up or reduce the costs of a project (Omega Centre 2012, 20). The National Audit Office also remained keenly interested in the HS2 project and made detailed reports on various aspects of the project over the years (National Audit Office 2013, 2020, 2023).

While HS2 showcases how harm can follow from interference by ministers, Heidi Alexander also criticised the previous government for a lack of drive when intervention was actually needed. The previous government announced that it would create a Euston Ministerial Taskforce for designing HS2’s connection to Euston, but it never met (Department for Transport 2025). Likewise, Alexander criticised the previous government for a lack of guidance and long-term thinking. This is because the Government signed £2bn worth of contracts for phase 2 of HS2 just months before it was cancelled (Ibid).

Often then, what looks like strong political will and direction – setting clear dates and opting for clear routes – can in the end be only superficially strong if based on no substantive facts or analysis, as has been the case in any number of the political decisions made over HS2 (Hopkinson 2020). All the indications are that as a project HS2 has not been well served by the political dynamics at play in Westminster. Phil Stride, who spearheaded the construction of the Thames Tideway Tunnel, also criticised ministers for a lack of consistency.



Image: Midjourney

On the one hand, ministers claimed that impacts on quality of life and health from noise “are less than significant.” On the other hand, in one case where the tunnel was originally going to be built, they said that noise and disturbance impacts would weigh against consenting to construction. Yet they ultimately consented nonetheless (Stride 2019, 135-6). Stride argued that this was “disingenuous, unjust and an insult to local residents” and proceeded to undermine the credibility of the project (Ibid).

Some political interventions are more routine but nonetheless impactful. Sometimes even when it seemed decisions were made by a government department; politics rears its head again.

In one instance, after a particular sharp pruning of the roads’ programme, a politically appointed official was charged with ringing round a host of MPs with the decision as to whether or not road projects in their constituencies were going to be funded or not. The official recounted that one such conversation went as follows:

Exasperated, the official moved on to the next one on his list. Sure enough, in the end, pressure was brought to bear from No.10, the DfT caved in, and the MP got his road scheme – fully funded and in the time planned – with no discussion on optimism bias, planning or costs, or any other reason as to why the Department changed its mind.

The difficulty for any kind of durable planning process is clear here. The Department did not find additional funds for the newly agreed project; it went ahead at the cost of some other project. There would have been a whole series of consequences that would no longer now take place – from the contract, the supply chain, the labour and materials and every other aspect of the failed project – because an MP made a phone call.

Official - “I am terribly sorry to tell you that the road scheme you were hoping was going to be funded this year is not going to go ahead.

MP - Yes, it is!

Official – No, I am afraid I am not ringing up to negotiate, I am ringing to tell you that the DfT is no longer able to fund the scheme.

MP – Well, let me tell you what is going to happen. After I finish this phone call, I am going to be ringing No.10 and speaking to the Prime Minister. As a result, the scheme is going to go ahead and is going to be fully funded” (Interview 2025).

Gold-plating projects

Another consideration is the “gold-plating” of projects. This is the idea that projects are often over-specified from inception. The expectation is often that projects should be made to a world-beating standard and quality, often with additional features and expensive materials which pushes costs beyond what is necessary.

The Stewart review found that the vision to make HS2 the fastest and best railway in the world increased the cost and scope of the project sizeably. It took away from the project’s original purpose which was just to increase network capacity and reduce congestion. He recommended that an effort be employed to counteract this culture (Stewart 20125, 8). A House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee report in 2019 likewise found that decisions were not taken to practically reduce costs such as reducing speed or not connecting to Euston station (House of Lords 2019, 4-5).

In evidence to the Treasury Select Committee, the Chair of the National Infrastructure Commission, Sir John Armitt discussed the issue of ‘gold-plating’ and HS2. He agreed that there was a tendency to over-specify ‘something that was absolutely at the cutting edge when something more functional would have done the job’ (House of Commons Select Committee 2023 Q41). High speed rail was much cheaper in France and Spain, for example, partially because of the topography of those countries but also because high speed in the UK was deemed to be 450km per hour. The specifications in Spain and France were closer to 300km an hour and their trains rarely ran at this speed because of operating costs.

At a recent meeting of the Public Accounts Select Committee this year, Treasury Permanent Secretary, James Bowler, declared that the Treasury ‘unashamedly’ felt it needed a greater role in decision-making following experiences like HS2.

“

Gold-plating projects is often caused by overly ambitious project owners, creators, engineers and sponsors (...)

Politicians might encourage gold-plating to make a name for themselves or insist on unrealistic deadlines to overcome short term political difficulties with the appearance of ‘fixing things’

He said that Treasury would be ‘around the decision-making table’ on new projects. This seemed to be offered as a panacea to the ills of previous projects and would not necessarily have instilled confidence in those with a concern for infrastructure in the UK (Dods Political Intelligence 2025). For some, it is the Treasury that is part of the problem, as often it is ‘incredibly reactive and short-term’ (Interview 2025).

Gold-plating projects is often caused by overly ambitious project owners, creators, engineers and sponsors – often civil servants, but it can also be a political problem as politicians might encourage gold-plating to make a name for themselves or insist on unrealistic deadlines to overcome short term political difficulties with the appearance of ‘fixing things’ (Flyvbjerg et al, 2003, 44).

The need for support from Westminster

Everybody needs stakeholder strategies to survive. Project professionals have to navigate the Treasury and Parliament to secure the construction of infrastructure projects. They need to ensure relationships with all aspects of government, as well as with politicians and the civil service.

Christian Wolmar has argued that project professionals often have an antagonistic relationship with the Treasury due to their differing interests, with project professionals' interests being to build projects, while the Treasury aims to reduce costs. Wolmar provided examples of the tactics and methods that the Treasury used to delay and kill off Crossrail (Wolmar 2018, 59-60, 116). Parliament poses the same problem, as political parties and individual MPs can likewise make or break a project. For example, the Whips can choose which MPs sit on a committee "to ensure that the bill gets through or, more likely, to kill it off" (Wolmar 2018, 59).

It is undoubtedly the case that support from politicians is fundamental for large infrastructure projects to succeed in the end. Christian Wolmar explained how energetic ministers were needed to keep Crossrail on track, not allowing it to be delayed and keeping it in the public eye. He also explained how even though Crossrail had general support, political instability in the form of changing ministers delayed the project's construction (Ibid 113-5, 61).

There were a total of five different Ministers of State for Transport in the short time from when the hybrid bill was launched in 2004 until the end of the Labour government in 2010. By the time, the line was fully operational in 2023, there had been a further 18 ministers. So, a total of 23 ministers over 19 years – rather substantiating Wolmar's point about instability. Nonetheless, ministers did stand up to criticism when events became troublesome, as in the 2018 deadline issues.

Wolmar showed how Crossrail might not have happened without Ken Livingstone, who as Mayor of London, was able to use his good offices to raise a business tax to pay for the project which provided a predictable, easy and reliable form of income (Wolmar 2018, 18; Buck 2017). He was helped in this by the unwavering support for the scheme by much of London's business community, particularly the London First group. Equally though, the emphatic uncoupling of Crossrail from any connection with the London Olympic bid by the Secretary of State for Transport was crucial. If Darling had not done so, then Crossrail may well have been subject to the unrealistic costings deadlines and projected milestones that plagued HS2.

Iain Docherty and Jon Shaw likewise argued the original support from charismatic politicians was fundamental for getting HS2 off the ground and that the loss of support from these politicians was ultimately its undoing. Politicians like Boris Johnson were necessary for making the case for the project, convincing key decision-makers to take action and negating political opposition, pressing the project through parliament (Docherty & Shaw 2025, 291-2).

It was never clear, however, that Johnson had the same kind of overarching political stakeholder strategy and commitment to HS2 that Darling had to Crossrail. When advocates like Johnson lost power, or no longer paid attention, then projects lost momentum and sometimes failed.

The National Infrastructure Commission and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority were both set up to provide expert guidance for delivering the government's infrastructure strategy, providing specialist advice on what to build and where money is spent. But these organisations were not consulted on the decision to axe phase 2 of HS2 and so, for Docherty & Shaw, did little to ameliorate the impact of personality politics on decision making (Ibid, 293). It will be interesting to see if the newly formed NISTA – a merger of the two organisations – has any better luck at sidelining personality politics. In a world dominated by politics, to some extent all significant projects need 'guardian angel' ministers to succeed and all projects need to survive political engagement and scrutiny.

The Thames Tideway Tunnel might seem an exception to this need for backing from politicians since it had no recognisable heavyweight championing the project once it got underway after a shaky start. Nevertheless, the project always had cross-party support and those in charge of the project expended a huge amount of effort gaining support from national government and Whitehall (mainly the Department of Communities and Local Government and Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), Members of Parliament and Lords, non-government Organisations and local government (Stride 2019, 141-4).

Just as political backing is important, political instability poses a threat to the success of projects. Both the Stewart review and a letter written by Mark Wild (Chief Executive Officer of HS2) found that political instability, caused by changing governments and unpredictable events (e.g. Brexit or Covid-19) hampered HS2's ability to succeed (Stewart 2025, 6; Wild 2025). This factor is felt by other project professionals too. A survey of project management professionals by the Association for Project Management found that 64% of respondents said they expected political instability to undermine their own organisation or project (APM 2022).

Image: HS2 Ltd (2025)



Recommendations

Political intervention

This may be an issue for the ministerial code or to be considered in liaison with the review of departmental project criteria, but the rules of the game need to change. It is, of course, entirely appropriate that the political proponents and opponents of projects argue their case strongly and the local MPs get involved in these processes but there need to be clear parameters. Governments are not exclusively technocratic and there needs to be room for political lobbying, but once decisions are made then they need to stick.

In the case of interventions such as the one cited on the road scheme projects above, an entire project ostensibly given permission would have to be scrapped to make way for what, one assumes, was a less deserving scheme under the set criteria. As a result, a contract, timeframe, supply chain, jobs and procurement of materials – for the other project were all lost on a relationship.

It may have worked out well for the MP concerned but did not for his colleague and not for the integrity of the process. There are rules in place to prevent overtly political decisions being made, but clearly, they need to be kept under constant review.

Recommendation

5

There needs to be much more clarity and caution on the influence that individual MPs can have on announcements for projects and a review of how departments pre-announce to preferred MPs.

Gold-plating projects

It is sometimes difficult to ascertain why the gold plating of projects occurs. It is a 'close relative' of an overambitious approach to project planning but is linked to the world of political dynamics too. It is also linked to the discussion on outdated criteria. One can understand an apparent obsession with speed for rail projects if a key criteria is journey time. If the criteria were more reflective of reality, that is speed but also environmental concerns, growth considerations, social as well as economic cost and practicability, then gold plating might not occur.

The Institute for Government's claim that a useful maxim might be 'the more ambitions the forecast, the more questionable the model' is apt here (Atkins 2017,3). There is, after all, no virtue in ambition that is neither practicable nor realisable. Ambition is to be encouraged but not at the expense of reality.

Recommendation

6

The review of criteria should ensure that there is no longer an overspecification of projects and should provide balance between ambition for projects and a more realistic approach.

The need for support from Westminster

The minister may change over time but the commitment of the role to the project should not. It is productive to have projects supported for survival by a 'guardian angel' minister particularly at Cabinet level. Some argue, as indicated above, that as soon as Boris Johnson lost interest in HS2, then any momentum or focus for the scheme evaporated. Others go further and say that as soon as George Osborne left the Treasury, support for HS2 inevitably waned (Interview 2025).

But politics still needs room for visionaries. Michael Heseltine's insistence that the route for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL or High Speed 1) should approach London from the east with a station at Stratford is one such example. He had to win the argument in government for the urban regeneration of East London to be part of the consideration for this route rather than from the south-east (BBC News 2007). He was opposed by both the engineering fraternity and the Treasury. The engineers could not understand why anyone would want to put a station barely 5-10 minutes away from the terminus. In 1991, they presented their case in a meeting with Heseltine and then left the meeting.

Fifteen minutes later they were told 'thanks for the presentation, but Stratford is in' (Interview 2025) This had enormous and lasting ramifications. The result was not only the transformation of the land around Kings Cross/St. Pancras and the revitalisation of St. Pancras, but also the awarding of the Olympics 2012 to London.

The developed transport hub around Stratford, and the short tunnel link to Kings Cross/St. Pancras, would be central to the Olympic bid's ultimate success. To reinforce this importance, the then Transport Minister charged with making the presentation on transport to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) drove through the newly created tunnel with the delegation.

There will always been a degree of turnover of ministers within any government but as far as possible it should be the case that each significant project should have a designated minister in charge. For example, it was the Minister of State for Transport who was the designated minister charged with all transport aspects of the Olympic bid project.

Recommendation

7

Each significant project of national significance should have a named minister in charge of the project from inception to final delivery.

Politicians in power need to resist an addiction to 'announcement-itis' in the field of infrastructure. Stretch targets are to be encouraged and there is nothing wrong with ambition, but completely unrealistic targets should be discouraged.

The Labour government promised up to 25 new rapid transit lines in major cities and conurbations, more than doubling light rail use. Whilst there have been some notable successes, such as Manchester Metrolink, the promised 25 schemes did not materialise. Notwithstanding the £180bn promised in the ten-year plan for transport, it is not clear whether this was ever a realistic target (BBC News 2010).

The current government claims that it will deliver 1.5m houses by the end of its term in 2029. In 2022-23, there were 234,400 new homes completed in England (including conversions), but the figures for 2023-24 are expected to be significantly lower. To build 1.5 million over five years, the Housing Forum suggests that the Government will need to aim for an upward trajectory, so that by 2028-29, around 450,000 new homes a year are being built - a significantly higher rate of housebuilding than has been achieved in the last 50 years (The Housing Forum 2024,2).

Recommendation

8

NISTA should be afforded a 'gateway'-type role that assesses all major projects and announcements of national importance in terms of funding and practicability.

Public support and stakeholders

The need for public support

Commentators have noted that maintaining public support is also essential. The Stewart review into HS2 found that the torrent of criticism that the project received over the years had a demoralising effect on those working on the project and negatively affected their ability to attract and maintain talent (Stewart 2025, 11-2). This criticism also came from both inside government (from ministers and professionals) as well as the public and was heightened by cost overruns and failure to meet deadlines (Ibid 9). The review recommended reaffirming the benefits of HS2 and enacting a strong advocacy campaign to do so. Remarkably, the Government did not seem to have a well-developed strategy to deal with stakeholders. In particular, it ignored a crucial set of stakeholders that were known to be both vociferous in their views and have access to media outlets – its own MPs.

When, as evident from the case study, the Crossrail project was in difficulties in 2018, it managed to overcome them and recalibrate its timelines and expectations with minimal damage largely because it had the continuing support of government and MPs and could cope with the concerns from some quarters of London's government, particularly the Mayor and the Assembly. Stakeholders wanted Crossrail to work and were more concerned that it gets back on track rather than pointing fingers and political point-scoring.

The Thames Tideway Tunnel project proved very controversial, especially to local residents affected by the plans. The project leads expended a great deal of capital in canvassing support for the project. This included commissioning an advertising company to make a short film, a digital advertising campaign.

They used social media, specifically Twitter (now X) to engage with the public, present their side and rebut opposition (Stride 2019,142).

There was also a serious problem fighting misinformation. In one instance, Tideway was described as the 'stink pipe that can give you cancer' by a local politician. Respectable newspapers like the Evening Standard misreported that thousands would have to be moved from their homes. To combat this, Thames Water gave an Evening Standard journalist an expert-led tour with a clear explanation of the purpose of the project which led to more favourable reporting (Ibid 141).

Forming an engaging narrative

The Treasury's recent review of the Green Book found that the Government has not produced enough clear business cases for new projects that sufficiently explain why a project is chosen. This has led to a lack of transparency with the public and key stakeholders not being informed about government's decisions (HM Treasury 2025a, 9, 21). In the absence of a clear and sharp narrative, this can become corrosive. There is suspicion about the undue economic focus of the BCR metric, followed by a lack of transparency over the choice made, which in turn reinforces the concerns about the whole process. These concerns will then be picked up and reinforced by disgruntled politicians who lost out in the process in the first place.

Several researchers have argued that HS2's chances were damaged by the lack of a clear and engaging narrative. Further, the only thing worse than no narrative is an incredibly weak and ever changing one.

Graham Winch argues that much of the justification for HS2 revolved around dull, quantitative analysis and short-term benefits (especially since much of the focus was on the unimpressive time-savings) rather than important long-term value, namely, the reduced congestion (Winch 2025, 12-3). There was a lack of counter-narrative to blunt attacks from critics, especially once it became clear that the project would significantly exceed its budget. Researchers have therefore argued that it is important for projects to appeal to the ‘animal spirits’ of the public (Winch 2025; Docherty & Shaw 2025, 291). Winch and Natalya Sergeeva argue that successful projects in the past have had a clearly stated and convincing narrative that also highlights long-term value (rather than present benefits) (Sergeeva and Winch 2021).

Whereas Crossrail and Thames Tideway both have clear narratives, HS2 seems to have a story that keeps changing. Initially it was all about cutting journey times, then it was about capacity on the network. It was about greater accessibility to London from the regions, and then about regional development itself. Its main focus was economic and then social, and regeneration led. It was a boon for the north, or simply more funding spent to the advantage of London. It was simply never that clear – and the fault for that lies with the politicians at the top.

Meeting stakeholders concerns

The UK’s planning laws have a high standard of stakeholder inclusion. A report by the Institute for Government (IfG) into case studies of major infrastructure projects found that the UK’s open planning and judicial system and constituency-based electoral system mean that local concerns have a notably powerful voice, something shown in the opposition to HS2 and Heathrow’s third runway (IfG 2017, 3). This leads to delays as efforts to engage with stakeholders and compensation often prove ineffectual, with locals rarely perceiving consultation and compensation as adequate (Ibid 25).



Image: Owen Price via Getty Images Signature

The report finds that successive governments shy away from confronting this problem. They procrastinate by commissioning new analysis, delaying decisions, and putting off decisions. The IfG report argues that governments should confront this problem by using structured and well-informed policy forums whereby affected groups can engage in dialogue on the alternate options and trade-offs (Ibid). They provide examples of successful versions of this in the Netherlands, the United States, France and Australia which they analyse in a previous report (IfG 2014, 23-4).

Phil Stride’s book on his time spearheading the Thames Tideway Tunnel (2019) details the lengths that project professionals went through to cavass public support and engage with stakeholders.

Their stakeholder engagement process alone consisted of 9,428 people/organisations, 2,600 customer calls, 20 petitions, 135 advertising events, 300 public meetings, 60 newspaper adverts, a book listing 56,000 land interests submitted to the Planning Inspectorate and 48 hearings (Ibid 129,132,139). In fact, he argued that the hardest part of the Thames Tideway Project was the consultation and planning application process, rather than the ingenious engineering design/ delivery to the problem of our undersized sewers problems (Stride 2019, 121).

The difficulty in managing stakeholders limited the scale of the plans. Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDs) are natural draining techniques designed to prevent flooding and improve water quality. SuDs could have been done alongside the Thames Tideway Project, but a review of the Thames Tideway Tunnel from the National Audit Office found that there was an “institutional barrier” to retrofitting SuDs because it would require a large number of stakeholders across London to cooperate (Stride 2019, 121; National Audit Office 2014, 23).

In essence, people reverted to their natural corners far too early in the process and it rapidly became a tunnel versus SuDs contest when, in reality, both were needed. The SuDs option was never realistically an alternative to the tunnel and the tunnel was never the ‘forever’ solution. The tunnel buys London 50-60 years to work on a more lasting and permanent solution – including amelioration through SuDs.

Arguably, the polarisation between the two sides has set back looking at the longer-term solution. If the tunnel had been sold as a partial solution that bought time and space to find a lasting answer, including a future role for SuDs, then the whole framing of the early debate might have been different (Interview 2025)

Local opposition groups consistently argued that alternative options were not properly analysed, a criticism which was often justified. The Thames Tideway steering group made their decision to settle on a tunnel solution in 2005, at this point rejecting other sustainable solutions (National Audit Office, 2014, 21). However, this was too early and the chairperson of the study into alternatives believed that a mixture of alternative solutions in addition to the Tideway Tunnel could have proved more cost-effective, noting that the original study overestimated the number of likely spillages from the alternative strategies (Binnie 2013, 4). This meant that alternative solutions were not properly analysed (IfG 2017, 14-5). This failure to analyse alternatives was noted by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee which also recommended that DEFRA carry out such assessments (House of Commons Select Committee, 2011, 12).

As alternatives were not properly analysed, local opposition from groups such as SaveYourRiverside and councils such as Hammersmith and Fulham were able to commission lengthy reports and “exhaustive” hearings which took a lot of effort from Tideway officials (Stride 2019, 140). Local opposition was often successful in its challenges and had resulted in changes to the Tunnel design in multiple instances.

The lesson here is that government must not fail to carry out a full analysis of alternatives and report the findings in an accessible way to stakeholders. This was an instance of ministerial failing too as a review from the National Audit Office found that Thames Water did not remodel previously appraised solutions in light of improved modelling because the Secretary of State had written to Thames Water asking them to continue with the existing plan in 2007 (National Audit Office 2017, 24; IfG 2017, 16). It is also an example of having confidence in the final decision but with some degree of flexibility. No-one seriously assumed that the tunnel was the definitive answer forever – it was not and, as we have seen, the role of SuDs should not have been dismissed out of hand.

The project was classified as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) in September 2014, so permission had to be given by the Secretaries of State, not local councils. This meant that much of the political dynamics around planning permissions and the influence of stakeholders, although burdensome, were managed through a clearly defined consent process. One problematic element though was there was an 18-month hiatus between the granting of the DCO and the start of the project - and within this vacuum the anger of some locals grew worse. (Interview 2025)

Nuno Gil and Sara Backman argue that infrastructure projects are often caught within a “governance trap”. Legal frameworks require high levels of stakeholder inclusion throughout the planning stage, but at the same time, investors prioritise cost-benefit analysis to determine if it is worth getting involved in the project and ensuring value for shareholders. This results in a governance trap as managers, incentivised by shareholder returns, dismiss stakeholder collaboration costs early on and commit to unrealistically tight budgets. Stakeholders can delay projects as they have legal rights to do so unless managers address their concerns. However, tight budgets trap the project sponsor into continuous bargaining cycles, being released only when investors release budget constraints. This results in inefficient spending, and they can find that up to a fifth of costs are spent on bargaining cycles between managers, shareholders and stakeholders (Gil & Backman 2025, 6-7). It also results in shareholders losing confidence in projects. Their article refers to several ways to avoid this, mainly focusing on collaboration with stakeholders at the earliest stage in the process as possible.

It remains to be seen whether the government’s plans for reforming the planning process will help with these issues. It may well be that the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will resolve many of the problems (UK Parliament 2025). It is certainly ambitious, but then so were the previous planning bills that clearly did not solve the issues.

The last Labour Government introduced a Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill that was intended to revolutionise the process for a generation. Had it been successful, then clearly a new bill would not be required.

Introducing the bill, Deputy Prime Minister, Angela Rayner said it would ‘unleash seismic reforms to ...get shovels in the ground... to build new homes and the vital infrastructure we need to improve transport links’ (Gov.UK Press Release 2025). It remains to be seen if the Government gets it right this time but some of the key elements of the bill are encouraging. Amongst other things, the bill seeks to ensure that more local planning decisions are made by officers under delegated powers, that there are more development corporations, a reform to the compulsory purchase order process, more strategic planning and a faster Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) regime for larger infrastructure projects. All of these developments are planned to streamline the planning process and would create a recalibration between differing and competing stakeholders – especially the role of local objectors and local and national politicians.

The problem the Government faces, as its counterpart discovered in 2003, is that for every set of stakeholders you satisfy with reform, you upset others. The provisions of the bill are likely to please building companies, housing corporations, large engineering firms and others involved in both medium sized and major infrastructure projects, but they are unlikely to please those in what we might term the environmental, heritage and democratic sectors. Indeed, the Government has already encountered some objections and votes against the bill from its own backbenchers, as it proceeds through Parliament (Elliott 2025). Even if the reforms are successful at speeding up these various processes from planning to construction, there will still need to be extensive stakeholder management plans, especially for the larger projects.

Recommendations

The need for public support

There is a strong need to both secure public support and respond to public concerns. Whilst there has to be space for objections and protest, there is also a need for a clarity to the protests and therefore at least some limitations on the ability to prolong delay and disruption. It is encouraging in this regard that the Government is reviewing further the use of NSIP designation and the Development Consent Order (DCO) (UK Parliament 2025). It has said that it will remove the statutory requirement to consult as part of the pre-application stage for NSIP applications and create a

more flexible consenting regime.

It has also said that it will enable key infrastructure developments to opt into the NSIP regime and will direct projects out of the regime if appropriate. (House of Commons Library Research Briefing Paper 2024, 2025). It is further committing to updating Relevant National Policy Statements (NPSs) for major infrastructure sectors and to keep them up to date to support timely decisions on DCO applications.

Recommendation

9

The Government should stick to its proposals to improve and refine both the NSIP regime and the hybrid bill process to ensure that there is a swifter dispatch of key infrastructure projects.

The need for public support

Too often recently, similar bills have been watered down in order to pass, but it is imperative that this does not happen. It is essential for economic growth, achieving its net zero strategy and a range of other key government policies. Of course, at every level of the planning process, the right to object should be preserved, but it is entirely responsible to limit this as part of the process. It is equally imperative that the planning process is speeded up for 'major infrastructure projects' as well as for more routine applications (National Infrastructure Commission 2023).

Recommendation

10

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill must complete all of its stages as swiftly as possible and with little or no amendments.

Forming an engaging narrative

The Treasury has argued that the notion of an over reliance on economic criteria is more about perception than reality and all government has to do is explain matters in more detail. This recommendation is inextricably linked with the greater clarity that is required on the criteria used to appraise projects. If the criteria used in determining decisions are much broader than the narrow, economically driven, BCR and increasingly include issues such as social, environmental and other concerns, then the narrative can be both better understood and contextualised. The one certainty is that, as well as clarity, the earlier the narrative is developed in the process the better – and the more likely it is that objections can be overcome.

Recommendation

11

The Government should stick to its proposals to improve and refine both the NSIP regime and the hybrid bill process to ensure that there is a swifter dispatch of key infrastructure projects.

Meeting stakeholders concerns

Often, if the concerns of the stakeholders are not addressed as early as possible, it can create an unnecessarily hostile process that takes time to recover from. There is a balance to be struck between involving stakeholders as much as is permissible or desirable, and undue delays or hold ups in the existing planning process. Many would agree that the key problems with, for example, the Thames Tideway project in the early stages was that the Development Consent Order was so clear about the tunnel option with no account for the SuDs process at all. The reality of the Thames Tideway project today is that there is probably a role for both into the future.

Recommendation

12

It is imperative that even within a more streamlined process for NISPs that the concerns of stakeholders are taken on board and addressed as early as possible.

Project planning and delivery

Strategic misrepresentation

Large infrastructure projects often face the problem of cost overrun and delays, it is in the nature of the schemes in terms of size, scope and impact. This might be due to unforeseeable circumstances (Love et al 2018), but often commentators point to poor management too (Flyvbjerg et al. 2012; Morris 1994; Morris & Hough 1987; Staw 1981; Stinchcombe & Heimer 1985). Lovaglio and Kahneman saw “optimism bias” (contractors overestimating the speed of building infrastructure projects and the benefits that the project brings, while underestimating their costs and uncertainties) as a psychological problem rooted in the drive and incentive to get their project approved (Lovaglio and Kahneman 2003). However, others see political dynamics and purposeful dishonesty from management teams and contractors as underlying this (Wachs 1989; Flyvbjerg 2012 328).

Flyvbjerg argued that actors “strategically misrepresent” the project due to competition over scarce funds. Politicians, unions, landowners, developers all gain from overstating the benefits, for example (Flyvbjerg 2012, 329). He singled out politicians for having a “monument complex” whereby they want to make a splash in their limited time in office (Flyvbjerg et al 2003, 44). This is especially problematic because politicians have often left office by the time more accurate calculations are made (Ibid, 44).

There have been case studies which have confirmed that strategic misrepresentation does happen in practice. The Olympic Games Studies Commission found instances of cities misrepresenting the costs and benefits of project construction in bidding process to host the Olympics (OGSC 2002). Will Jennings too found examples of this when examining the construction of the London 2012 Olympics (Jennings 2012; Jennings 2013, 8).

In more general terms, Jennings looks at how it is politics that shapes the commitment of political capital and public resources to mega-events like the Olympics. The big decision to proceed comes first, the how, when and at what costs follows on. He also looks at what causes the invariably systematic underestimation of risk and the overestimation of benefits in bidding and planning for such projects (Jennings 2013, 4). Sometimes difficulties arise when other politicians measure the success or failure of such projects against much more narrowly defined criteria and metrics – with the hyperbole and political spin omitted.

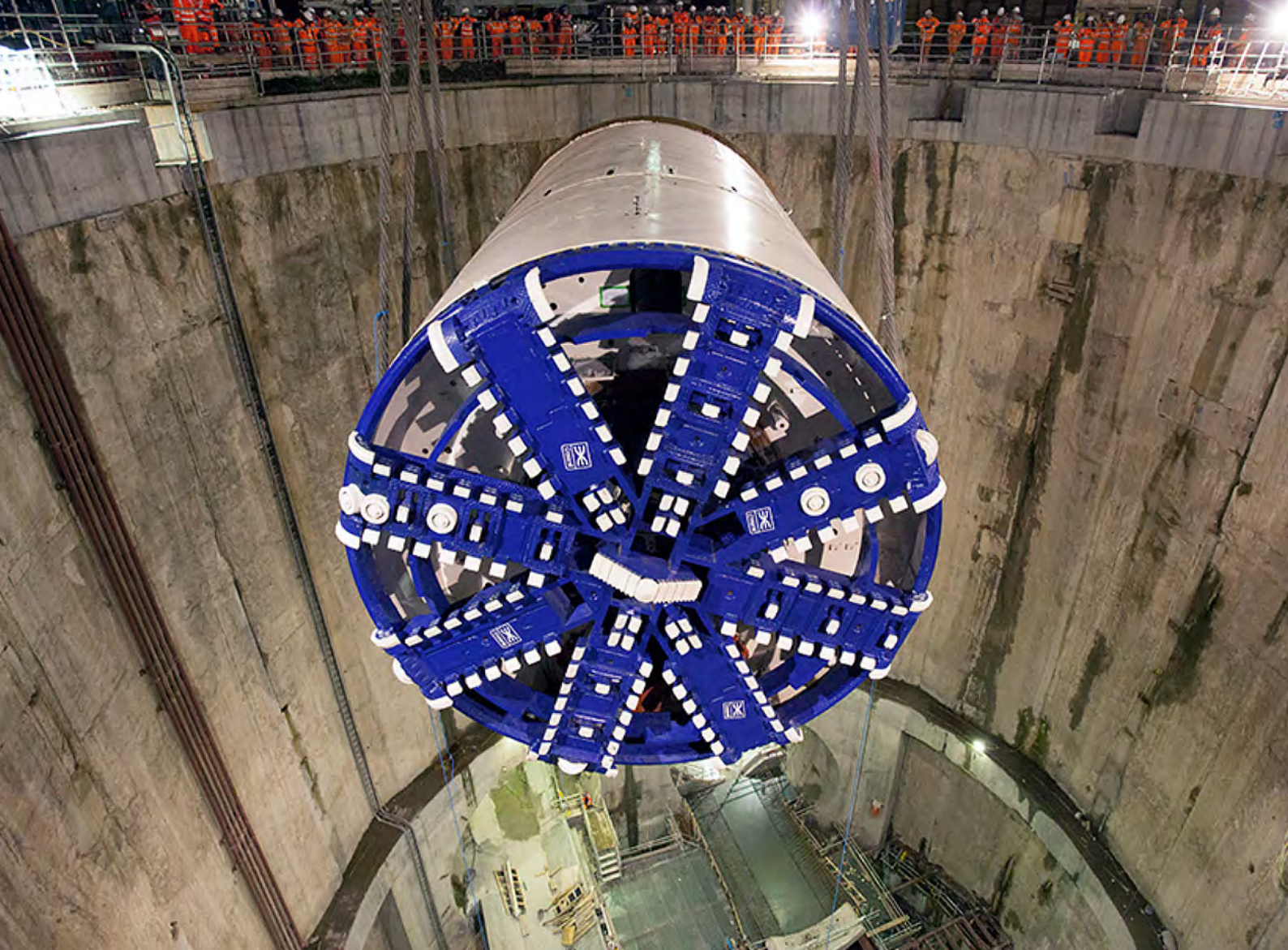


Image: Main Construction – History of the Elizabeth Line; Crossrail Ltd

In Mark Wild's letter to the transport minister outlining HS2's failings, he argued that there was an overly optimistic analysis of the costs and scheduling, inadequate risk provisions, unevidenced efficiency overlays and a failed assurance process (Wild 2025). He noted that production of the project had started before there was full consent over the designs between contractors (Ibid 2025). On a mundane level, there was also concern about the badging of the project. The project was as much about connectivity, productivity and capacity as it was about speed – so why call it high speed at all? Why not the North-South Link scheme? Perhaps it has more to do with the problem of allowing engineers, rather than politicians or marketing managers, to name these projects (Interview 2025).

The Association for Project Management has studied instances of optimism bias and strategic misrepresentation and outlined ways project professionals can avoid this (Craik 2021; Elliott 2023).

Some commentators have disputed the account of strategic misrepresentation in Flyvbjerg et al. and they argue that it uses statistically unrepresentative sample sizes and does not properly examine the fact that the project manager's motivation may be deceitful (Flyvbjerg et al. 2012; Love & Ahiaga-Dagbui 2018, 364-365; Forster 2018; Gil & Fu 2022, 225). It is also true that national departments, like the Department for Transport and the Treasury, have initiated measures to avoid bias from actors with vested interests as they have an incentive to produce realistic accounts of project cost and building time projections (DfT 2006; HM Treasury 2003).

Sharp and arbitrary deadlines

Sharp deadlines can put unnecessary pressure on for the completion of a project. In 2018, the completion of the Elizabeth Line was pushed back four years, only four months before it was set to be opened. The Crossrail Operations team published a report detailing the lessons learnt (Association for Project Management 2024).

They found that the overly ambitious immovable deadline caused havoc for the success of the project. It meant that the management team lost grip of the situation, focusing instead on localised parts which limited their ability to view the project holistically (Wild 2023, 8). It meant that the complex integration and testing phases were rushed through.

It also incentivised workers to tell management what they wanted to hear, disconnecting them from the reality of the project. The early end date meant that around 30% of Crossrail's organisation was prematurely demobilised (including important departments such as risk management), adding to costs as they needed to bring these departments back (Wild 2023,12).

It is important to set practically workable deadlines, which are monitored operationally and to be transparent when they cannot be met. Failing to do so undermines the confidence of stakeholders and sponsors (Wild 2023, 13). In learning these lessons, the Elizabeth Line was opened in stages, and this allowed them to respond to issues, risks and uncertainties that arose.

The opening of Heathrow's fifth terminal in 2008 was by any measure a catastrophic failure, despite construction of the project being an unmitigated success. Dozens of flights were cancelled, and thousands of bags were lost on what should have been a celebratory opening day. The House of Commons Transport Committee found that there had been a deterioration of communication between the British Airport Authority which was

in charge of building the project and workers themselves. This meant that there was inadequate response to concerns raised by workers on issues that might arise on the opening day (House of Commons Transport Committee, 2008, 5-8). The success during the construction of terminal five also led to a feeling of invincibility amongst the project sponsors which meant they did not adequately deal with real issues that went on to impinge on the success of the opening day (Ibid 21).

Tim Brady & Andrew Davies published a paper exploring the failed opening day, undertaking further research and using media accounts. They found that opening day required using unproven new technology (mainly IT systems) which created a big risk that was exposed (Brady & Davies 2010, 156-7). They also found that, because the deadline was treated as sacrosanct, it became politically impossible to push the date back further. Nonetheless, it should be emphasised that in terms of providing a major piece of new infrastructure, the project was a real success. The disaster was in public relations terms on the opening day although most matters were quickly resolved (Ibid 155-157). Perhaps the lesson here is not to measure success or sit back on one's laurels until the job is completely done and fully operational.

Another problem with sharp and inflexible deadlines is that they can be exploited by interested parties. Wolmar explains how sharp deadlines for the opening of the Jubilee Line Extension were exploited by trade unions. The deadline of 2000 was immovable. Everyone knew the deadline and that it could not be changed. The works to be completed should have been organised to allow for this immutable nature. Most deadlines usually have a little leeway and flexibility built in but 31/12/99 was an unusually hard and fast deadline. Trade unions leveraged this fact by threatening to go on strike which would have meant postponing the chance of being ready for the opening date (Wolmar 2018, 40).



Weak central oversight and costing information

Multiple reports agree that HS2 had weak central oversight. The Oakervee review found that the lack of central oversight meant it was unclear who should be accountable in many of the decisions (Oakervee 2020, 86-7). A report by the Institute of Civil Engineers into the cancellation of phase one of HS2 found that the lack of “guiding mind” meant that each individual Joint Venture developed their own detailed specifications of structures (e.g. bridges and embankments). This resulted in variation and reduced opportunities to conduct checks and balances to ensure value for money (ICE 2024, 10,12,15; Winch 2025, 11-12).

As referenced earlier, in a recent statement to the House of Commons, Secretary of State, Heidi Alexander bemoaned the absence of ‘oversight and scrutiny’ on the HS2 project and the lack of ministerial grip via the ministerial taskforce’ (House of Commons Debates 2025). She also endorsed the findings of the Stewart Review and said it would ‘transform infrastructure delivery across government ... not just for the Department for Transport’ She charged the last government with pressing ahead regardless while ignoring some of the key advice from Oakervee to halt construction contracts pending improvement in price and simpler engineering. In terms of the focus of this project, the ‘litany of failure’ was a litany of failure from above – from the politicians at the top of government.

Another problem that project professionals face is weak costing information. A 2021 review of government spending evaluations, conducted by The National Audit Office, found that only 8% of its spending on major projects - £35bn out of a total of £432bn had robust evaluation plans in place in 2019. Out of the government’s 108 most ‘complex and strategically significant projects in its Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP) 77 representing 64% of spend had no evaluation at all (National Audit Office 2021, 6).

This meant that the Government could not be confident that much of its spending was having a positive impact and was good value for money.

The Treasury failed to recognise uncertainty and risk in its original bid budget for the 2012 London Olympics. The original estimate for investment from the private sector was £738 million but this figure was not supported by robust analysis (House of Commons Select Committee 2008, 5). Indeed, in the March 2007 budget this figure was adjusted downwards to £165 million which is a significant gap (National Audit Office 2007,17). The same report found that the Bid Committee had ignored the Treasury’s own guidelines and the advice of consultants who had warned that there were significant uncertainties and that much more work was needed to develop robust figures (Ibid, 7; Jennings 2013, 7).

The government’s Evaluation Task Force (ETF), established in 2022, recently reviewed the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP). The GMPP does not represent all of the government’s ongoing projects but is a collection of the government’s most complex and strategically significant projects. In 2023-24, there were 227 projects in this category representing a spend of £834bn. The ETF review showed that 34% of all GMPP projects, representing a spend of £378bn were assessed as having robust evaluation plans in place, 66% representing a spend of £456bn did not provide evidence of good quality evaluation plans (Cabinet Office Evaluation Task Force 2025,3). Clearly, issues around both oversight and costings remain and although the work of the ETF has much improved the situation in this area, they need to be much more robust in both cases.

Recommendations

Strategic misrepresentation

It is not necessarily the case that managers or politicians deliberately misrepresent matters in the context of project assessment and appraisal, but they may do so inadvertently. Such strategising occurs when resources are rare, and it is the role of the appraisal process to weed out this tendency. There is a legitimate role for optimism bias in the process but there is the potential for it to be abused. As we have seen, departments of government such as the Treasury and Transport have sought to eradicate subjectivity and bias from vested interests, but it is difficult to contend factors such as a politician's 'monument complex'.

There is, of course, a fine line between ambition and strategic misrepresentation, and processes should be in place to deter misrepresentation from the beginning of projects. The ETF should fulfil a role here. Each of the recommendations in this section dovetail and work with earlier recommendations, particularly those in the sections on appraisal criteria, 'gold plating' and the need for public support.

Recommendation

13

The Evaluation Task Force (ETF) should review again the last ten years of major infrastructure projects – the GMPP – to identify instances of strategic misrepresentation, the 'monument complex' and the potential misuse of optimism bias to learn the lessons from these behaviours and to produce good practice guidelines to be used across government.

Sharp and arbitrary deadlines

There are more than enough reasons for projects to go wrong without adding in what we have determined are 'hostage' deadlines. Immutable deadlines are rare but when they exist and there has not been for whatever reason, sufficient progress beforehand, they can distort the success of projects. One famously immutable deadline was the 31 December 1999, as discussed earlier, but the problems around the Jubilee Line Extension did not start with the hard deadline but with the lack of significant progress on the run-up to the deadline.

Equally problematic is politicians imposing deadlines that cannot be realistically achieved simply for 'grandstanding' purposes. Politicians making 'noise' rooted in false dawns and over-optimism to give the impression of action is not useful. Of course, all deadlines are likely to be met, as we have seen, if enough money is thrown at the problem. Between them, the government, NISTA and the project profession should ensure that the timelines are as robust and accurate as they can possibly be.

Recommendation

14

The proposed timelines of major projects need to be stress-tested to resist both 'hostage' deadlines and political grandstanding.

Weak central oversight and costing information

Whilst the fact that at least the ETF now knows that a significant amount of the major projects in the government's own portfolio do not have robust evaluation plans in place, is an improvement, it is still far from satisfactory. The work that the Taskforce carries out in this regard should usefully influence the development of the next set of appraisal criteria. The Taskforce is of little value if its role is only ever to look back. It must influence the future processes for appraisal too.

The Magenta Book on evaluation also needs to be updated if the thrust of the recommendations in this review are taken into account (HM Treasury 2020a).

The importance of a golden thread from start to finish in project management is crucial. More often than not, weak oversight and costings follow from a lack of vision and an absence of clear goals and outcomes in the project concerned. Good project management is essential to good delivery.

Recommendation

15

The Evaluation Task Force must make sure that all projects have a robust monitoring and evaluation process in place at the start of each process. The Government must ensure that this is a key element of the appraisal criteria and process.



General Reflections

The Government emphasises that its infrastructure strategy sits at the heart of its plans to renew the UK (HM Treasury 2025, p.2). If it is taking the issue of infrastructure seriously, then it needs to be confident enough to ensure that Parliament knows, understands and can analyse what it is doing in the field of infrastructure.

Currently parliamentary oversight of infrastructure issues is diffuse and lacking in strategic focus. Sometimes the Treasury Select Committee takes the lead, sometimes it is taken by the Public Accounts Committee and through it, the National Audit Office. Sometimes it is the 'parent' departmental Select Committee such as the Transport Select Committee for road, aviation and rail projects; Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for flood alleviation issues; and Health or Education for capital investments in areas such as hospitals and schools.

It is recommended that a new Select Committee for Infrastructure be established. The purpose of a new Select Committee would not be to replicate the work of the existing committees but to review all aspects of the overarching infrastructure strategy – particularly in the areas that require joined-up government. The early indications are that the Government has given serious thought about how the infrastructure strategy can be implemented, how the planning system should be reformed and streamlined, and how planning and infrastructure can contribute towards the economic growth that the Government's economic policy is so heavily reliant on.

Each of these areas is crucial to the success of the Infrastructure Strategy and the key public sector projects contained within it and it needs a robust accountability framework. It is imperative that the Government achieves its aims, for example, the changes proposed in the review of the Green Book appraisal criteria (HM Treasury 2025a).

The Select Committee should also review the work of the task forces that are emerging in Infrastructure Strategy. Too often, politicians think creating vehicles such as task forces or reviews are actions in themselves rather than simply pathways to action. The Evaluation Task Force and the Place-Based Task Force will be particularly important in the pursuit of the infrastructure strategy and should be central to the work of the new Select Committee. If they remain simply internal performance measuring devices, they will ultimately be of far less value.

Recommendation

16

A Select Committee on Infrastructure should be established.

It is also the case that the work of the newly formed National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA) will be central to success. The current position of NISTA means it is unlikely to achieve its outcomes. It is regarded by many important players in the field as simply an arm of the Treasury with no scope for an independent voice or autonomy (Interview 2025).

Ostensibly, NISTA 'unites long-term policy and strategy with best-practice project delivery and will transform the delivery of UK infrastructure, service transformation and other major projects, to ensure the government's investments are driving growth and delivering the government's missions' (HM Treasury 2025b).

This sounds commendable but ultimately it remains simply an internal unit inside two government departments. The two, Treasury and Cabinet Office, are mismatched and it is difficult to see NISTA as anything other than a Treasury creation. This will impede its efficacy. If it is to realise these aims fully then it needs to be part of, but separate from, the government.

The closest model for this is the executive agency model – as the National Infrastructure Commission was. This would have the benefit of being recognised as an independent source of expertise that is not simply doing the government's bidding.

But it would only work if it was afforded the power to achieve its key objectives, which could remain broadly the same:

- Overseeing the implementation of the government's 10-year infrastructure strategy
- Unblocking barriers and speeding up delivery of government's major projects
- Providing effective assurance for the government's priority projects
- Setting standards and improving the government's project delivery capabilities
- Leading expertise on private finance

but could be better pursued with a greater degree of legitimacy as an arms-length body (HM Treasury 2025b). The Government must ensure that NISTA has the power to achieve these objectives. One key criticism of NIC was that he had the independence but ultimately no power. It may be that the government and Parliament should consider a model that puts NISTA on a similar statutory footing as the National Audit Office or the Office of Budget Responsibility.

Recommendation

17

The National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority should become a non-departmental public body with full autonomy rather than a joint unit of the Treasury and the Cabinet Office (NISTA).

The final recommendation of a general nature concerns trying to take political dynamics out of the process altogether at least for projects that focus on critical national infrastructure. This should include critical national infrastructure projects, the Government Major Projects Portfolio and the plan to fast-track 150 planning decisions on major economic infrastructure projects by the end of this Parliament. The more that narrow party politics can be taken out of these planning decisions the better.

This will depend, at least in part, on the Government securing the Planning and Infrastructure Bill but also on a recognition that even a government with a very large majority does not last forever. Infrastructure projects are by their very nature long-term and transcend the electoral cycle. If at least some of these vital infrastructure projects could be lifted out of the world of party politics, then so much the better for all concerned.

Recommendation

18

The Government should seek to work with the opposition parties to secure an agreed list of projects that can be taken forward with a maximum of cross-party support.



Summary of Recommendations



1. The over-emphasis of economic value

The development of an accountability framework across government that keeps the Green Book and broader project appraisal process under continuous review, so that it does not overemphasise economic value.



2. Regional bias in the location of projects

The establishment of full criteria for ensuring that place-based factors are at the centre of all government infrastructure decision making to avoid regional bias.



3. Regional bias in the location of projects

A detailed evaluation and analysis of the first rounds of 'transport for city regions' funding to see whether it has redressed concerns of regional bias.



4. Complex outdated and manipulable methodology

There needs to be a department-by-department review of every single criteria used in assessing and appraising projects so that they are brought up-to-date and made consistent across government.



5. Political Intervention

There needs to be much more clarity and caution on the influence that individual MPs can have on announcements for projects and a review of how departments pre-announce to preferred MPs.



6. Gold-plating projects

The review of criteria should ensure that there is no longer an overspecification of projects and should provide balance between ambition for projects and a more realistic approach



7. The need for support from Westminster

Each significant project of national significance should have a named minister in charge of the project from inception to final delivery.



8. The need for support from Westminster

NISTA should be afforded a 'gateway'-type role that assesses all major projects and announcements of national importance in terms of funding and practicability.



9. The need for public support

The Government stick to its proposals to improve and refine both the NSIP regime and the hybrid bill process to ensure that there is a swifter dispatch of key infrastructure projects.



10. The need for public support

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill must complete all of its stages as swiftly as possible and with little or no amendments.



11. Forming an engaging narrative

The Government should create a process whereby a clear narrative and rationale for major projects is required.



12. Meeting stakeholders concerns

It is imperative that even within a more streamlined process for NISPs that the concerns of stakeholders are taken on board and addressed as early as possible.

13. Strategic misrepresentation



The Evaluation Task Force (ETF) should review again the last ten years of major infrastructure projects – the GMPP – to identify instances of strategic misrepresentation, the ‘monument complex’ and the potential misuse of optimism bias to learn the lessons from these behaviours and to produce good practice guidelines to be used across government.

14. Sharp and arbitrary deadlines



The proposed timelines of major projects need to be stress-tested to resist both ‘hostage’ deadlines and political grandstanding.

15. Weak central oversight and costing information



The Evaluation Task Force must make sure that all projects have a robust monitoring and evaluation process in place at the start of each process. The Government must ensure that this is a key element of the appraisal criteria and process.

16. A Select Committee on Infrastructure should be established.



17. The National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority should become a non-departmental public body with full autonomy rather than a joint unit of the Treasury and the Cabinet Office (NISTA).



18. The Government should seek to work with the opposition parties to secure an agreed list of projects that can be taken forward with a maximum of cross-party support.





Image: Harrison Haines via Pexels



Conclusion

This review has looked at the key role that political dynamics play in the world of public sector projects. It is early days for the new government – elected only in July 2024 – but there are signs that it is taking its role seriously in terms of the infrastructure of the nation.

Many of the issues discussed are not new but the current discussion is taking place within an environment where there is a ‘real’ infrastructure strategy for the first time (Interview 2025). Compared to predecessor documents such as the 2018 ‘National Infrastructure Assessment’, the current strategy appears to be far more robust and serious with a much sharper focus (National Infrastructure Assessment 2018). It also brings together economic infrastructure (transport, energy, water and wastewater, waste, digital and flood risk management) with housing and social infrastructure (hospitals, schools and colleges, and prisons and courts) (HM Treasury 2025). As the government appears to be taking infrastructure seriously, so should the political world. This is why a Select Committee on infrastructure is suggested – there still needs to be political accountability and analysis.

So, politicians set the strategy and the key projects within it. Other politicians oversee them through the process of parliamentary scrutiny. It is right that the newly created body, NISTA, is charged with overseeing the implementation of the strategy, as well as supporting progress reports to accompany future spending reviews.



Image: London City Rail bridge; morrbyte via Getty Images

This is such an essential role that it was felt that NISTA should have a more distinct and independent identity and the space to carry out its role, free from Treasury domination. It can be seen too that NISTA is afforded a role in many of the recommendations presented here. If NISTA is established as an arms-length entity then this should be subject to review, perhaps in five years. There are those who would feel more comfortable with NISTA back under the Treasury umbrella and those who would wish it even greater autonomy.

One suggestion is to set it on a statutory footing, similar to the Office for Budget Responsibility with clearly delineated functions and an obligation to work with the OBR on the costings, appraisal and funding of projects (Interview 2025). It was felt that this would more readily attune the infrastructure projects to the economy and would mean that other appraisal factors such as the social, cultural and non-economic could be utilised, as well as the contribution to productivity nationally. This may be worth looking at in future but there was certainly broad agreement on NISTA's vital role (Interview 2025).

The Government has also identified planning reform as essential not only to achieving its infrastructure strategy but also the necessary economic growth and house building that the country needs to advance. It appears to be serious on planning reform but is already facing some pushback from its own backbenchers. Time and time again, it has been suggested that schemes benefit from scrutiny but that the limited and contained scrutiny of a NSPI/DCO process or a hybrid bill is essential for large complex infrastructure schemes.

The last time the Labour Party was in power there was much discussion on a separate route for national infrastructure projects including a review of the compulsory purchase process – but in the end neither figured significantly in the 2003 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2003 (UK Parliament 2003). As is evident from the discussion here, reform of the planning system this time is not optional, it is central to achieving the infrastructure plan and at least reframing and limiting the scope for negative political dynamics to play a role here.

These three key elements – an infrastructure strategy, a key role for NISTA and a serious planning reform programme of action – are the key building blocks for developing the infrastructure necessary for the economic growth, for further investment in the regions, for increased social development and the house building needs into the 2030s and beyond. In essence, if you ‘want to do anything to change the long-term economics of the country then you have to invest in its infrastructure’ (Interview 2025).

There is no doubt that political dynamics will continue to play a role in all of these areas, but the recommendations contained here offer a way to optimise and harness the influence of politics rather than diminish it.

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