

Strengthening the Powerhouse:

Opportunities and challenges for
the project profession in North
West England



Introduction

The social and economic importance of the North West region of England has long been championed. Before Levelling Up, there was the Northern Powerhouse, the coalition government's vision for a well-connected, globally competitive economy in the north of England, that would not only improve quality of life for local people but also rebalance the UK economy.

Developing infrastructure, collaboration between public and private sector stakeholders, and attracting and retaining skilled workers are crucial for both initiatives. It's clear from this that Project, Programme and Portfolio (P3M) professionals will make a major and essential contribution.

This presents many opportunities to the project profession; a profession that previous research by Association for Project Management (APM) has shown adds £39.9 billion of gross value to the regional economy and employs 449,000 full time equivalent (FTE) roles.^[1] There are of course challenges associated with capitalising on those opportunities.

Members of APM's North West Network and other project and programme specialists from the North West region met recently to discuss these points. This regional network, comprising many diverse sectors, came together to strengthen connections across the local project community, and to understand cross-sector synergies and opportunities. This paper is based on that discussion, supplemented with data from additional sources.

This conversation should be an ongoing one, however. APM will facilitate this through its regional networks and by engaging with the project community to implement solutions. APM's volunteers are also playing a critical and fundamental role and APM would like to express its sincere thanks for the valued contribution these volunteers are making to our profession. You can become part of this conversation by joining or following your local APM Regional Network. More information about APM's communities and volunteering opportunities can be found [here](#).

The APM North West Network offers a variety of opportunities to network and learn about latest developments in project management within the North West region. Discover more about APM's North West Network and its programme of events on the [APM website](#).



The current picture

Top employment sectors in the North West

Percentage of working-age population employed in this sector.

Human health and social work activities



Motor vehicle retail and repair



Education



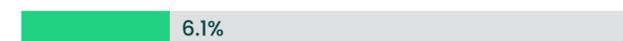
Manufacturing



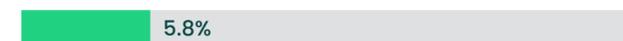
Construction



Public administration and defence



Professional, scientific and technical activities



*Source: Office for National Statistics (2021 UK census data)

Greater Manchester – requirements and aspirations by 2030:

- 180,000 more graduates
- £5bn on transport infrastructure
- 126,000 extra homes

*Source: The Resolution Foundation <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/events/making-greater-manchester-great-again/>

Liverpool City Region – requirements and aspirations by 2030:

- Spending on research and development to reach 5% of economic output a year
- Increase exports from £8.5bn in goods and services to £11.8bn
- Achieve World Health Organization air quality standards

*Sources: Liverpool City Region Innovation Prospectus, Invest Liverpool and Friends of the Earth Climate Action Plan for the Next Mayor of Liverpool City Region



'The war for talent'

Project, programme and portfolio experts in the North West of England have identified several barriers to attracting and retaining talent in the region. The region is home to many unique project-centric employers such as the nuclear energy sector and advanced manufacturing companies, among others. However, an overall shortage of project professionals in the area means such organisations can find themselves competing for suitable project practitioners.

"It [recruitment] becomes quite competitive. It's like a war for talent."

"We don't just have a shortage of project managers we have a shortage of everything. That leads to a war for talent and we're all fishing in the same talent pool."

The talent shortage in the region is compounded by issues such as availability and cost of housing, and transport links, which are outside of the profession's control. However, a number of potential solutions and mitigations were suggested at the APM North West Network meeting. These included:

- Offering remote or flexible working to reduce commuting requirements and widen the area project professionals can be recruited from.
- Organisations enhancing their range of employee benefits and working together to not 'outcompete' each other on salaries for project roles. While it is obviously necessary for employers to stand out and offer a compelling proposition to prospective employees, competing on salary alone creates barriers for the profession as a whole because talent is likely to be siphoned to organisations that can offer higher pay.

"Personally I don't feel we, as project managers, help each other. We all compete by offering salary increases. But all that means is that when you really need a skill in your area, you are on the back foot financially."

Retaining talent was also identified as a challenge for project teams in the North West. Some of this is due to people leaving the profession altogether. Some is due to people moving on to work for project management consultancies. One differentiator that other employers can offer over such consultancies is positive working culture and team identity. Creating positive work environments with a genuine team spirit and clear development pathways was identified as a way to encourage people to stay in roles for longer.

"What in-house employers have that consultants don't is team identity. We strive to give our young people a lot of chances to come together as part of a tribe. One of the things that project management firms can 'sell' to young people that the big consultancies can't is a team identity."



Collaboration and partnerships



APM's Golden Thread research, which studied the contribution of projects and project management to the UK's economy, found collaboration and partnership to be a driver of growth in the North of England.

The research stated that the buoyant and emerging industry sectors in the Northern Powerhouse footprint ^[2] demonstrate that partnerships and collaborations between the public and third sector (councils and local authorities, charities, education/universities) and the private sector (corporates, investors and SMEs) have the potential to be the engines of growth. Such collaborations and partnerships offer opportunities to capitalise and expand upon each other's work within industry sectors.

An example of this type of collaborative approach that was discussed by delegates at the recent APM North West Network gathering was PlanBEE, an industry driven, higher level skills programme that prepares people for careers in technical and professional roles in architecture, engineering, building services and construction. Participants undertake placements with multiple employers over two years and emerge with experience and a recognised qualification.

PlanBEE Manchester was developed by Manchester City Council, Manchester Life, Ryder Architecture and Gateshead College. This embodies the collaborative approach that project experts in the North West have called for. This regional programme offers people a chance to work on a wide range of local projects, from hospitals to iconic arts venues.

Another idea put forward at the APM North West Network gathering was for symposiums and networking events that bring together local industry, councils and students. These were described by one attendee as 'local energy hubs'.

"A challenge we have is that a lot of people don't know what they want to do. We have to help them find their feet."

"There are a lot of interesting people doing things that might inspire young people to become involved [in the project profession]."

Conclusion

It is clear that projects and project professionals are of vital importance to the sustained economic and social success of North West England. The work of P3M professionals is too important to be put at risk due to issues such as skills shortages and misconceptions of the profession's value. Addressing these issues is therefore essential not only to the profession, but to the businesses and communities that benefit from successful project delivery.

The Northern Powerhouse and Levelling Up concepts must not become mere 'buzzwords' for aspirations that are unconnected to the economic and social reality of regions like the North West and the North East. A recent report by the Public Accounts Committee stated that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the lead Department for Levelling Up funding streams, could not provide any compelling examples of what had been delivered so far.^[3]

The Project profession must continue the conversation. As the only chartered membership organisation for the profession, APM will listen and lead debate, and encourage ongoing discussion through engagement with its regional networks, its members and the wider project community.

^[1] PwC. (2019). The Golden Thread: Regional Report. Association for Project Management. <https://doi.org/10.61175/EQJW5580>

^[2] Cheshire and Warrington, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Humber, Lancashire, Leeds City Region, Liverpool City Region, North East Sheffield City Region, Tees Valley, York, North Yorkshire, and East Riding – and North Wales

^[3] House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, Levelling up funding to local government. March 2024. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43820/documents/217384/default/>



Be a part of the community

APM is supported by a broad and diverse community of volunteers; leading project professionals, who share their time to provide thought leadership, education outreach, mentoring and other valuable activities. APM has recently refreshed its volunteering offering to maximise and diversify opportunities for members and project professionals to volunteer. This includes the introduction of Volunteer Networks, Task and Finish Groups, and the evolution of branches into regional networks.

You can find more information about how you can become involved with APM's communities [here](#).

Learn more about APM's North West Network on the [APM website](#).



**We are the only chartered
membership organisation
for the project profession**

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