

# FUTURE TRENDS: FACING THE CLIMATE CHALLENGE

APM INSIGHT PAPER



THE CHARTERED BODY FOR THE PROJECT PROFESSION



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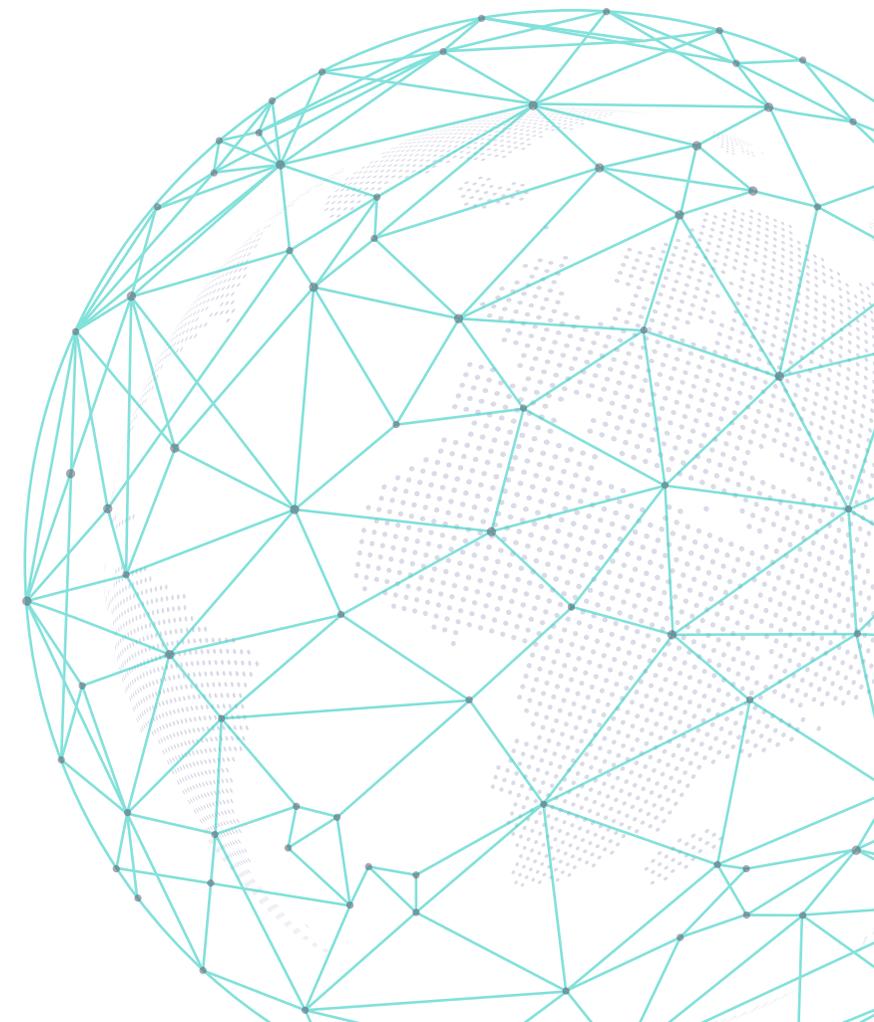
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## FACING THE CLIMATE CHALLENGE

For project professionals, like so many others, coronavirus and its fallout dominated 2020. Across the economy, the sudden economic shock created by the pandemic has led to a rapid rethinking of established priorities and plans. 'Building back better' is the optimistic slogan for an ambitious recovery, but in the face of climate change, it raises a crucial question: how can we build back 'greener', on a lower-carbon basis?

By some analyses, the UK has already achieved half of the progress needed to move from its 1990 baseline levels of carbon emissions to net zero<sup>1</sup>. But with new, ambitious emission targets announced by the UK Government for 2035, as well as the goal of reaching net zero by 2050, there is still much to do. Yet it's widely agreed that the easiest gains have been made. The hardest yards lie ahead, with the potential for greater disruption to how people live currently – and greater potential for resistance.

*“The 2020s must be the decisive decade of progress and action”*

**Lord Deben**  
UK Climate Change Committee chair

*“We are the first generation to feel the effect of climate change and the last generation who can do something about it”*

**Barack Obama**

It's clear that the 'new normal' of the post-pandemic world has to mean a decisive shift towards net zero. Within the project profession, we have seen some encouraging early signs. In August 2020, a poll of over 860 project practitioners, undertaken for us by market researchers Censuswide, found that 50 per cent of respondents claimed the global pandemic had led to them and their organisation placing either a slightly or significantly greater focus on net zero carbon projects. Just six per cent said they were placing less focus on net zero projects as a result of coronavirus.

Building on those findings, the questions asked in the latest edition of our *Salary and Market Trends Survey* go deeper into project professionals' views in this area and their expectations for the future.

<sup>1</sup> 'Analysis: UK is now halfway to meeting its 'net-zero emissions' target' Carbon Brief (18 March 2021)

## In summary

- Coronavirus dominates project professionals' current priorities. Climate change is ranked as the fifth most significant challenge facing project management in the years ahead.
- Competing priorities are the biggest barrier to action on climate change (identified by 36 per cent) – followed by finance or investment restrictions (33 per cent), and a lack of knowledge and awareness (27 per cent).
- Despite that, 55 per cent of respondents say that their organisation now has a strategy for reaching net zero. Planning is most common in heavy carbon industries – those which will likely need to make the most radical changes to achieve net zero.
- There is a strong correlation between those working in organisations with a net zero strategy and those who felt well equipped for the challenge ahead. In those organisations with strategies, confidence was high, at 51 per cent, compared with just 23 per cent in those with no strategy.
- Professional development also counts here: Chartered Project Professionals (ChPPs) were more confident (56 per cent) than their non-chartered counterparts (36 per cent).

It's unsurprising that coronavirus ranks as the current top priority – yet isn't that the story of our relative collective inaction on climate change over the last three decades? Awareness of the climate change threat has been building, but there have always been too many other urgent matters and too many short-term priorities. Climate change looked like a remote and long-term challenge.

If we have learned anything from coronavirus, it is that swift and decisive action is vital. Much time has already passed – but further delay could have devastating consequences.



Awareness of the climate change threat has been building...further delay could have devastating consequences

# HIGHLIGHTS AND KEY FINDINGS

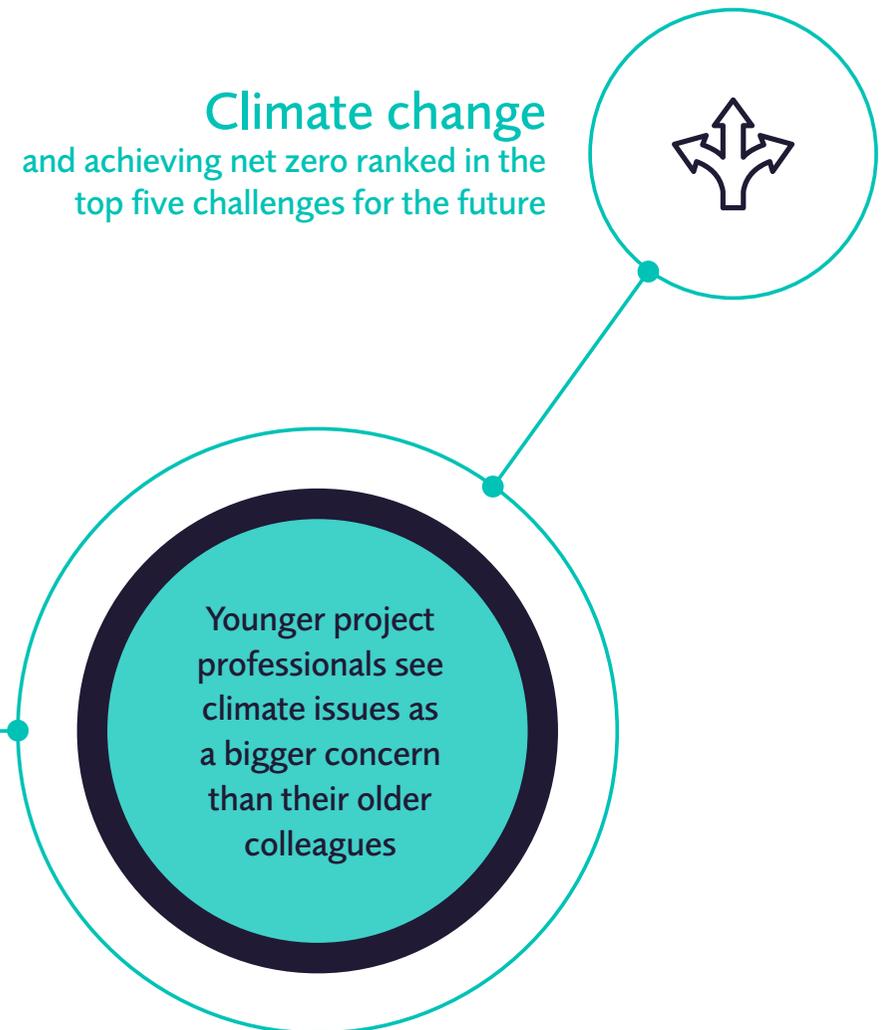
## 1 Climate change and competing priorities

For so many people, the coronavirus pandemic and its consequence have been paramount over the last year.

That's evident in the results of our *Salary and Market Trends Survey*. The proportion of respondents citing climate change as a significant challenge to the project profession in the next five years has fallen over the last 12 months, from 50 per cent to 43 per cent. By this measure it ranks fifth among a range of challenges – a list topped by coronavirus and its ongoing challenges (64 per cent), the impact of Brexit (54 per cent), developing the skills and talent pipeline (47 per cent) and developing more innovative and digital services (44 per cent).

The survey also asked respondents to select the single most important issue. Climate change and net zero was ranked fourth, selected by 14 per cent. This ranking was topped by the coronavirus pandemic (22 per cent), the challenge of developing future skills (15 per cent) and the challenge of demonstrating more clearly the value of the project profession in terms of productivity, the economy and social benefits (also 14 per cent).

This dip in focus on climate change is not surprising given the immediate concern of the pandemic. It is likely to see a major tick upwards this year, as decarbonisation planning starts to come to the fore in projects.

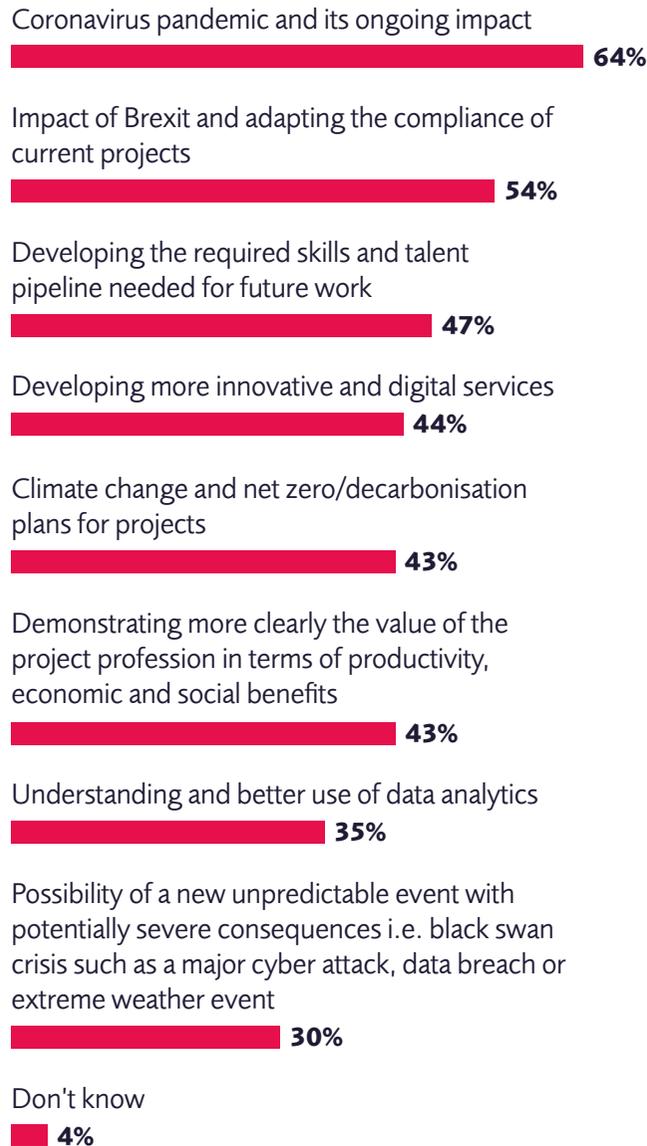


A closer look at the data reveals some interesting points. For example:

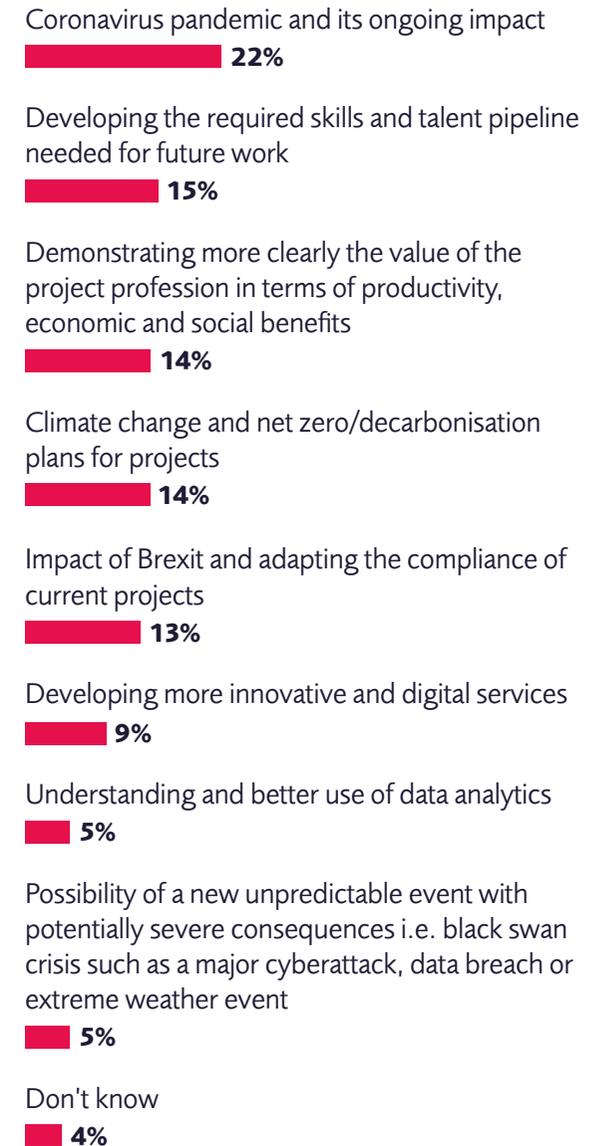
- Despite assumptions on views of younger and older people towards climate change, there is no significant difference in the proportion of 18 to 24-year-olds and 55 to 64-year-olds who see the climate crisis as a key challenge.
- Male professionals may be more likely to see the climate challenge as significant than women (44 per cent of men compared with 40 per cent of women): The feeling is strongest among men aged 25 to 34 (49 per cent).
- Sectors with the highest levels of concern were two carbon-heavy industries, construction and energy (54 per cent) – and the arts (53 per cent)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Based on a sector sample of 15 people.

Significant challenges facing the project profession in the next five years



Single most significant challenge facing the project profession in the next five years



## 2 The barriers to action

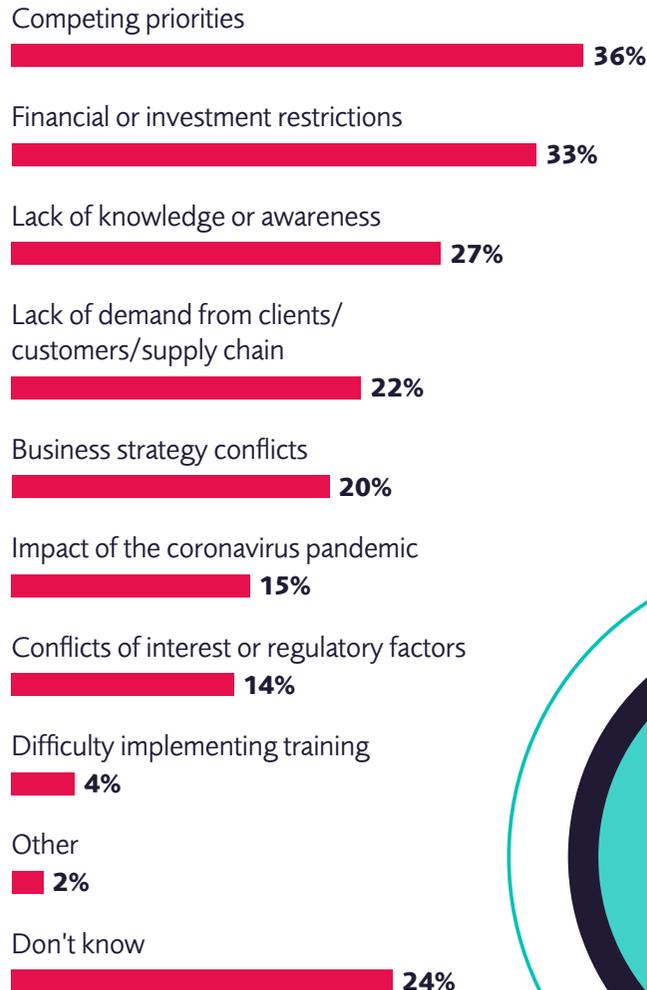
We asked respondents what the most significant challenges had been in moving towards a decarbonisation/net zero strategy in their organisation.

The results underline the sense that action on climate change is being held back by competing priorities. That was the most-commonly identified blocker to progress, identified by 36 per cent. Twenty per cent said that business strategy conflicts were a key challenge.

The other top problems were perceived as being financial and investment restrictions (33 per cent) and a lack of knowledge and awareness (27 per cent).

The impact of the pandemic was only identified as a blocker by 15 per cent – perhaps reflecting that it has only been an issue for the last 12 months, where many of the other challenges are long-standing.

### Challenges in moving towards a decarbonisation/net zero strategy



55% say their organisation has a decarbonisation or net zero strategy



Action on climate change is being held back by competing priorities

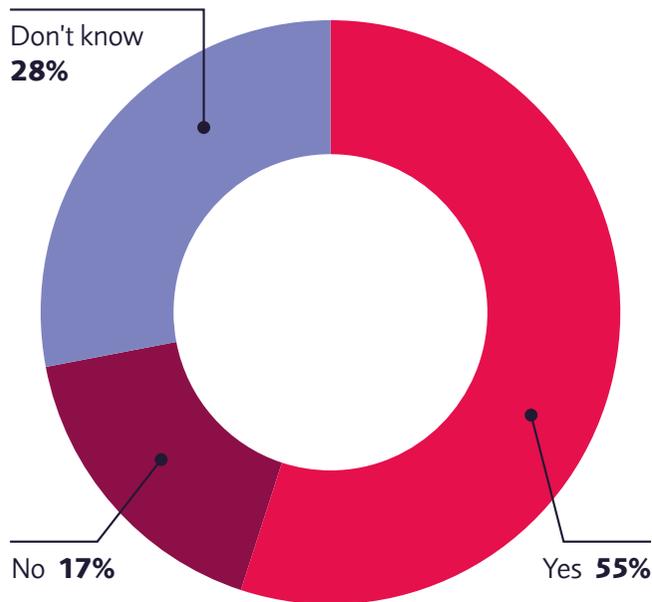
### 3 Organisational decarbonisation strategies

The sheer scale of the net zero challenge demands clear strategic direction and decisions about the way forward.

More than half of respondents (55 per cent) say their organisation has a decarbonisation or net zero strategy.

Only 17 per cent state that they do not, with 28 per cent saying that they don't know.

Climate change and net zero/decarbonisation strategy



*Organisations developing net zero carbon strategies must demonstrate commitment and capability to deliver them well*

**Sue Kershaw**  
APM president

There was a wide range of sectoral answers, reflecting the varying salience of climate change to different sectors. The sectors where respondents were most likely to report having a net zero strategy were energy (76 per cent) and transport (72 per cent), closely followed by local government (71 per cent) – a tier of government that has been highly active on climate change. As of February 2021, for example, 300 councils – 74 per cent of the total – and eight combined authorities/city regions have declared a climate emergency.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly the sectors with the least engagement were: the voluntary sector (22 per cent); life sciences (30 per cent); IT (34 per cent); and health (36 per cent).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Source: [climateemergency.uk](https://climateemergency.uk)

<sup>4</sup> The voluntary sector and life sciences each had a sample size of less than 30 respondents.

## 4 Are project professionals ready for the challenge?

Do these organisation-level strategies translate into confidence among project professionals about whether they are equipped to meet the climate change challenge? The results are mixed.

Just eight per cent say they consider themselves 'to a large extent' equipped to tackle net zero challenges in their projects, with 28 per cent equipped 'to some extent'.

Increasing this – eight per cent has to be a priority for the years ahead – and reducing the number of project managers (18 per cent) who consider themselves 'not at all' ready for the challenge, or only 'a little' equipped (26 per cent).

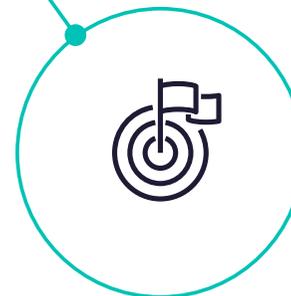
Looked at by sector, confidence was highest in the energy, transport and consulting sectors – those, perhaps, where discussions about climate change and cutting emissions have been running longest.

We discovered a correlation between those working in organisations with a net zero strategy and those who felt well equipped. In those organisations with strategies, confidence was high, at 51 per cent, compared with just 23 per cent in those with no strategy.

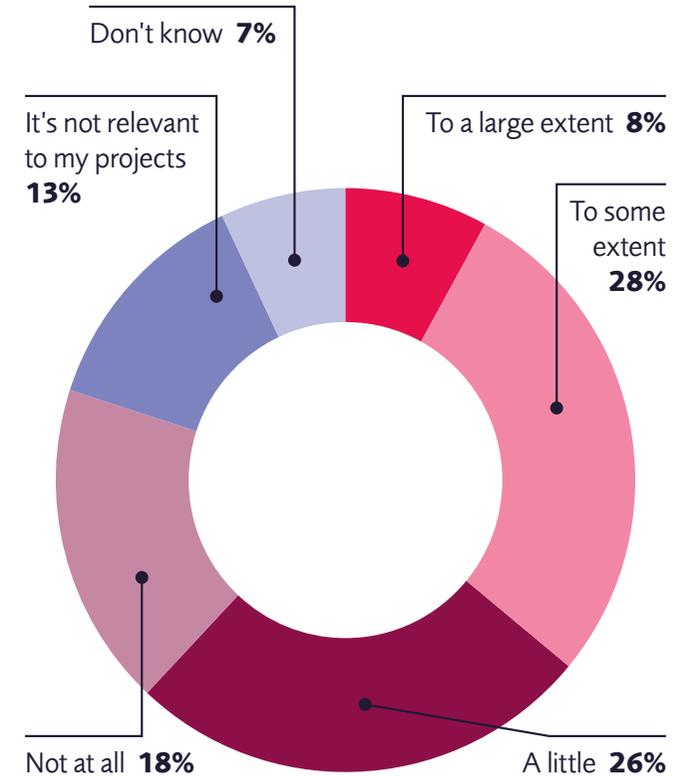
Professional development also counts here: Chartered Project Professionals (ChPPs) were more confident (56 per cent) than their non-chartered counterparts (35 per cent).



**36%** of project professionals say they are confident they are equipped to tackle net zero challenges, either to a large or to some extent



Equipped to tackle net zero challenges



## 5 Taking action on climate change

There are some clear trends emerging for organisations working to minimise the impact of their projects on the environment. Top of the list of measures is a focus on reducing resource waste (identified by 76 per cent of respondents), followed by measures to reduce resource use (75 per cent) and collaboration to reduce waste during project delivery (71 per cent).

These measures are followed by the need to raise awareness about climate change in projects, (highlighted by 61 per cent), and sharing knowledge, research and experience on climate change and biodiversity loss. That knowledge-sharing is critical, both for building confidence to tackle the challenges we face, and for the practical sharing of solutions.

### Tackling climate change

Minimising wasteful use of resources in projects



Adopting measures to reduce resource use



Collaborating with stakeholders to reduce waste during project delivery



Raising awareness of climate change in your projects



Sharing knowledge, research and experience on tackling climate change and biodiversity loss on an open source basis



Aiming to achieve net zero carbon in project outcomes



Advocating for faster change towards regenerative practices in projects



Encouraging clients to include climate change and biodiversity loss in the project lifecycle



Recognising 'green' performance in projects through awards, prizes and case study exemplars



Including mitigation of climate and biodiversity impacts as a key measure of project success



## 6 School-age education on the climate

We asked survey respondents if people felt that mandatory education on climate issues should be provided in schools. The results were overwhelmingly in favour, with 88 per cent supporting the idea. Only seven per cent said no.

As part of our commitment to inspire the next generation, we have been working with the youth organisation Teach the Future, which campaigns for climate issues to be taught more widely in schools, including the provision of vocational courses to develop green skills for the future. The appetite is there: according to their 2019 study, just 16 per cent of students feel they know a lot about climate change and 68 per cent want to learn more.<sup>5</sup>

Yet as Teach the Future's own research<sup>6</sup> shows, 70 per cent of teachers feel they have not received adequate training to educate students on climate change – and 41 per cent say climate change is rarely or never mentioned in their schools.



*Students need to be taught about the climate emergency and ecological crisis: how they are caused, what we can do to mitigate them and what our future lives and jobs are going to look like due to them*

**Teach the Future**  
A youth-led campaign for climate education in the UK

88%  
of respondents  
favour mandatory  
teaching of climate  
issues in schools

<sup>5</sup> National Union of Students/Green Schools Project, *Schools Sustainability Survey (2019)*

<sup>6</sup> Teach the Future, 'New research shows nearly three quarters of teachers haven't received enough training on climate change' (16 March 2021)

## FACING THE CLIMATE CHALLENGE: THE ROLE OF THE PROJECT PROFESSION

The climate crisis creates some specific challenges that the project profession is uniquely positioned to help overcome.

One key challenge is the question of how best to coordinate the rapid delivery of projects and programmes that will contribute to climate goals. A proper joined-up approach is needed across government and with other agents of delivery. Clarity of ownership and overall leadership is also required: without that, previous cross-government initiatives have often struggled to gain traction. We cannot afford for the climate response to fall short due to similar problems.

The government also needs to embed the latest project management thinking, for example systems thinking: are airport expansion plans or new Cumbrian coal mines consistent with the over-riding need to achieve net zero? The road to net zero is unlikely to be a straight or smooth one, so an overview is vital. A dynamic assurance approach should be adopted too – ensuring we get delivery as we progress, not at the end.

Another challenge is around skills and capability, not least in project delivery capacity. As a nation, do we have the skills to deliver a low-carbon future? An ambitious approach to climate change demands an equally ambitious approach to building the capacity to deliver change. That has to include project management skills, not just the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) skills typically associated with low-carbon projects.

The world has entered what is probably *the* decisive decade for efforts to achieve net zero and avert a global catastrophe. The project profession will have its work cut out in this decade and beyond to deliver the projects needed to achieve net zero. The profession is in a unique position to make a critical contribution.

But as APM Honorary Fellow Professor Peter Morris aptly put it in 2017: “There are plenty of opportunities, and needs, for project managers and the project management profession to stand up, claim the right to direct and influence activities, and perform and contribute to the development of a lower emitting world of greenhouse gasses. But to do that many of us will have to stand up and be counted, making difficult decisions and suffering adverse commentary. Looking at your children and neighbours, one can't doubt that this is the right thing to do: it's the only game in town. Let's act professionally and play hard before they take our pitch away.”

Read our blog: [Climate change and project management rethinking the relationship](#)

*“ Looking at your children and neighbours, one can't doubt that this is the right thing to do: it's the only game in town. Let's act professionally and play hard before they take our pitch away ”*

**Professor Peter Morris**

# THE CLIMATE CHALLENGE FOR THE PROFESSION

We agree that there is an urgent need to coordinated action by project professionals across all sectors. This will address and minimise the impacts of both the climate change and biodiversity emergencies. We also support the objective that projects of every size and purpose should minimise their environmental impact and ensure they can adapt to the future climate.

As the chartered body for the project profession, we have developed an action plan based around the five objectives we set out in our 2020 Climate Statement:

- 1 Raise awareness and encourage debate about the consequences of climate change and how individuals and organisations can make a difference now and in the future.
- 2 Guide, advocate and promote the need for investment in climate change adaptation, mitigation and sustainable development. We will do this by working in collaboration with public bodies, professional bodies and other stakeholders as well as our corporate partners and individual members.
- 3 Encourage, identify and celebrate good practice within the project profession that responds to the climate change challenge.
- 4 Share and disseminate knowledge and research to encourage the take up of project innovations which are responsive to climate change and sustainability challenges.
- 5 Promote education, training and professional development opportunities to help members gain the knowledge and skills to respond effectively to climate change.

Read our [climate statement](#).

## READ MORE

- This year's [Salary and Market Trends Survey](#) report provides a comprehensive overview of salaries, along with findings on working life and job satisfaction, diversity and inclusion and a range of future trends – as well as providing a snapshot of a profession dealing with the impact of a global pandemic.
- Our [Projecting the Future](#) 'big conversation' initiative examined the challenges and opportunities around climate change. [Read the challenge papers](#) and find the wrap-up summary of the conversation.
- [Climate change and what the project management profession should be doing about it](#) paper explores ideas such as the possible role of a climate change PMO.

Links to recent blogs on climate change:

- [Small, lean, part-time – how rewilding Britain tackles grassroots projects](#)
- [Climate change and the project profession: can we help deliver the 2050 net zero target?](#)
- [The pandemic has shown sustainability is vital, but how can project professionals help?](#)
- [Climate change and projects: how can we stay on track for net zero?](#)

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## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This research is drawn from our seventh annual *Salary Survey and Market Trends Survey* which took place in November 2020. The survey was carried out by YouGov on our behalf and 2,626 individuals took part.

The survey revealed much about the profession's view of climate change generally and its own role in addressing it. The study centred around seven key themes that included awareness and engagement with climate change, the challenges facing the profession, and the measures that can deliver the biggest lasting impacts.



## ABOUT APM

In our changing world, project professionals are at the forefront of delivering change and the environment for delivery is becoming ever more complex. The project profession needs to be better understood, to have consistent standards and to set the highest bar.

We're Association for Project Management – APM. We're the only chartered membership organisation representing the project profession in the world, building the profile and respect the profession warrants and setting the most exacting standards.

We're a registered charity, delivering education and developing qualifications, conducting research and providing resources. We run events, share best practice and give the project management community – individuals and businesses – the opportunity to connect and debate.

We know that better project delivery is about achieving your desired outcome. We believe it's about more than process alone. When doing so will make a difference, we challenge the status quo and champion the new. So, in a complex and shifting world, we help the project profession deliver better.

## Association for Project Management

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