

## **UK Project Management Round Up <sup>1</sup>**

### **Supplemental Report**

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## **COVID-19**

### **Introduction**

As the old saying goes, we live in interesting times and things are changing rapidly so almost as soon as I filed my monthly report a week ago, new counter-measures were announced and some reactions from the Project World have emerged so I would like to share these with you.

### **Level of “Threat”**

It is always difficult to judge the level of threat and there is much speculation in the scientific world. There are, however, some tell-tale signs to be observed through careful reading of press reports. Perhaps the most alarming was the closure of public houses (pubs, taverns, inns etc) in the whole of Ireland. What made it more worrying was the timing – just before St Patrick’s Day. In UK, this has been matched by the curtailed filming of *Crossroads*, perhaps the most depressing TV soap opera on the planet. Older viewers will also have been alarmed by the reduction in episodes of *The Archers*. This is nothing to do with Robin Hood and is the world’s oldest radio soap opera. The programme will now be cut back from 5 episodes to 4 per week and the omnibus edition on Sundays will be curtailed, too. This is the first sign of rationing in this country since the Suez Crisis, in 1956.

Other broadcast events, from sports to arts, have also been dropped, offered in reduced form or represented by repeats of old editions. This takes people differently, different

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strokes for different folks, so to speak. However, the news is not all bad as the Eurovision Song Contest for this year has been cancelled, freeing up a whole evening of national humiliation as UK attracts *Nil Points* from numerous judges.

## **Positive News**

The news this past month has not all been negative, as indicated above. Some signs of a return to more civilised ways can be seen in the press, on television and in the streets (only for those allowed out, and that is precious few of us these days). Perhaps the most unlikely sign is the return to a more courteous House of Commons where Ministers have been acknowledging the part played by opposition Members, ceding the floor to other Members of Parliament to allow clarification of intent and to field problems notified. Furthermore, we are having an exercise in open Government with daily Ministerial briefings led by the Prime Minister and supported by expert advisers who field questions via video link. There is a steady stream of Ministers on the morning news programmes and they have generally shown themselves to be effective, on top of their briefs, prepared to accept criticism and react positively when something comes up that they cannot answer.

All very encouraging. This is reflected in other parts of the country where large numbers of citizens are offering help to neighbours, helping out with shopping, instructing the technologically illiterate how to use basic apps such as Skype, FaceTime and the like in order to stay in touch with friends and loved ones. Nearly a million people of all ages have responded to the Prime Minister's appeal for volunteers to support the NHS – he asked for a quarter of that number. And perhaps the biggest blessing of them all is that BREXIT has been pushed off not just the front pages but out of the media entirely! Bliss!

## **Project World Reactions**

As indicated in my main report, there have been many other upside impacts to COVID-19. While most small businesses are shutting up shop for the duration, some will not re-open, with many much-loved outlets lost to their local residents. The toll is not limited to small businesses either. We have seen the virus provide the last straw for several well-known firms such as fabric and decorating flagship Laura Ashley, cut-price phone retailer Carphone Warehouse and sandwich empire EAT all bite the dust in the first skirmishes with COVID-19; no doubt there will be other big name casualties in the weeks ahead. We can but hope that the entrepreneurs will find opportunities for new start-ups. The latest casualty is space start-up OneWeb which filed for bankruptcy protection in USA shortly after the launch of its latest payload of 34 satellites, bringing its total number of satellites in orbit up to 74, at the end of March. OneWeb was in competition with SpaceX and other companies to beam global high-speed internet to Earth from space.

There is no shortage of projects “out there” to combat the virus. The big battle continues to be the search for the so-called instant immunity tests. This is an important project as

success will allow recovered casualties to be identified quickly so they can return to work. Also, an antibody test would allow NHS staff to work with patients safely in the knowledge that patients should be immune and could neither contract nor spread the disease. In the words of Prime Minister Johnson, this would be a game changer, saying: “*The great thing about having a test to see whether you’ve had it, is suddenly a green light goes on above your head and you can go back to work safe and confident in the knowledge that you are most unlikely to get it again.*” More importantly, it would help scientists to understand how many infected people display no outward signs.



Image: <http://considerable.com>

The Government has also invested £20 million in projects to study the genome of Covid-19 in order to better understand its spread. Robert Jenrick, housing and communities secretary, told the BBC that tests for antibodies as well as simplified identification tests would be available within weeks. Speaking of the antibodies testing kit, he said: “It will be a very simple one to use and it will

be similar to taking a pregnancy test.” Public Health England is working to produce its own test but according to *The Times*, the government is also evaluating those that have been produced overseas.

The search for a test is an interesting example of benefits management. There are several levels of benefit: first, the test would allow those not at risk to be identified and thus help keep the economy afloat. Less obvious benefits include:

- Marking patients for hospital discharge as free from illness so they can be transferred out to other facilities (in particular care homes where the closed environment would be at risk of accepting possibly contagious patients);
- Allowing NHS staff to be returned to duty, (thus enabling other patients to be treated and removing the threat of overwhelming the system);
- Better understanding the effects of the virus (thus allowing infection and mortality rates to be identified which in turn can reassure the public and reduce panic).

The work will be carried out by a consortium, whose members include the NHS and Wellcome Sanger institute. They will analyse the whole virus genome in samples from coronavirus patients at centres across the country. This will allow them to monitor how the virus is spreading and whether different strains are emerging.



Image: Motorsport Technology

Meanwhile, Formula 1 motor racing has ceased for the foreseeable future, so all those world class engineers are sitting idly by with little to do. Except that is not true and their own projects will continue but in less frenetic style. However, the teams have joined forces with rocket scientists from the aerospace sector and leading car designers to form three groups to develop a plan to design and manufacture 5,000 ventilators as soon as possible, and a further 25,000 in the coming weeks. We currently have some 8,000 available and Matt Hancock, the health secretary, said his department will buy as many as can be produced.

According to press reports, some companies are focusing on new designs, with the High Value Manufacturing Catapult research centre hoping to present a rapidly manufactured ventilator system that can operate around the clock for a fortnight by the end of March, according to the *Financial Times*. Other consortia are working on increasing production of existing versions. The companies involved include Smiths Group, Airbus, McLaren, GKN, Meggitt and Nissan, the newspaper said. Elsewhere firms such as gTech, well known for advanced vacuum products are investigating a new design made of plastic using 3d printing technology. Similarly, Dyson have just been awarded a contract for a new type of ventilator. Critics have suggested this is of limited value as the design will need to be tested and then approved and even in an accelerated development environment this will take time that can be ill-afforded.

According to *The Times*, Helpful Engineering, said: “Idled by this crisis, vast amounts of engineering and manufacturing resources sit by with no use. We can either wait and watch the suffering and terrible labours of others, or we can try to act.” It is co-ordinating international efforts to design and build equipment as fast as possible. *Stuart Cobbe*, director at an artificial intelligence company in London, is helping to run a project to

ensure hospitals do not run out of connecting tubes. It will source tubing and transport it to hospitals, making sure they can be sterilised and are the right length. “I am convinced that the committed people in Helpful Engineering will help doctors save lives in this crisis as it unfolds.” Mr Cobbe said.

Work is progressing on a temporary facility to deal with the rapidly rising numbers of casualties. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) was tasked to support the National Health Service (NHS) and has responded in two ways. The most straightforward task is assistance with distribution of personal protection equipment (PPE) which has improved rapidly since MoD became involved. Rather



The ExCeL Centre, London AKA NHS Nightingale Image: Inspired Displays.

more spectacular is the conversion of the ExCeL Centre into NHS Nightingale. The hospital, in East London, will initially provide up to 500 beds equipped with ventilators and oxygen. The capacity will then continue to increase up to 4,000 beds, should it be required.



Image: Daily Mail.

NHS chief executive *Sir Simon Stevens* said: “Under these exceptionally challenging circumstances the NHS is taking extraordinary steps to fight coronavirus. That’s why NHS clinicians and managers are working with military planners and engineers to create, equip, staff and open the NHS Nightingale London, and we’re very grateful for their support.” The hospital is expected to be operational by 29 March. Additional emergency hospitals are scheduled to open in mid-April: the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff will handle 2,000 patients; the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham will have 5,000 beds and the Central Conference Centre, Manchester (previously a major railway station before conversion to an exhibition centre) should hold at least 1,000.

These are just a few of the efforts going on in UK to overcome COVID-19. No doubt there are similar efforts throughout the Project World. We may not be seeing light at the end of the tunnel but that illustrates an important point. Policy should be driven by data. We have precious little that we can rely on right now so we cannot tell if the light we see is the end of the tunnel or just a train approaching. I think I am seeing policy making change here in UK as a result of proper scientific thinking and analysis. This policy making is well supported by the Project World (UK Branch).

## About the Author



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**Miles Shepherd** is an executive editorial advisor and international correspondent for PM World Journal in the United Kingdom. He is also managing director for MS Projects Ltd, a consulting company supporting various UK and overseas Government agencies, nuclear industry organisations and other businesses. Miles has over 30 years' experience on a variety of projects in UK, Eastern Europe and Russia. His PM experience includes defence, major IT projects, decommissioning of nuclear reactors, nuclear security, rail and business projects for the UK Government and EU. Past Chair, Vice President and Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM), Miles is also past president and chair and a Fellow of the International Project Management Association (IPMA). He was a Director for PMI's Global Accreditation Centre and is immediate past Chair of the ISO committee developing new international standards for Project Management and for Program/Portfolio Management. Miles is Chair of the British Standards Institute's Committee on Project, Programme and Portfolio Management and has been involved in the development of UK's BSI 6079 for more than 25 years. He was involved in setting up APM's team developing guidelines for project management oversight and governance. Miles is based in Salisbury, England and can be contacted at [miles.shepherd@msp-ltd.co.uk](mailto:miles.shepherd@msp-ltd.co.uk).