

UK Project Management Round Up¹



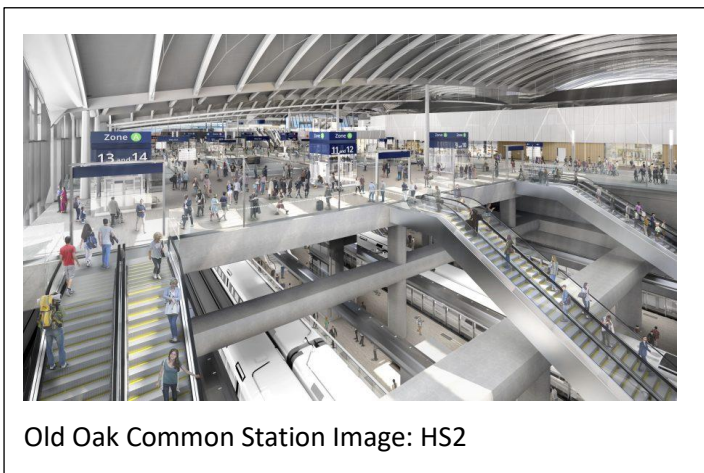
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INTRODUCTION

Well, we are well into the 4th month of lockdown here in UK. Most of us have become used to the lack of “normal” social contact, adapted our working lives and managed to continue to educate our children. So, life continues but what we took to be normal is no longer available while most of us obey the lockdown rules. There are always contrarians who challenge the rules introduced by the Government, claiming that there is no real problem and the virus is no worse than seasonal ‘flu. I think the numbers show a somewhat different situation.

The situation is challenging in so many ways. The news continues to be dominated by the pandemic, but life still goes on. This month, I want to look at projects, both those that started Before the Virus (BTV) and those that started After the Virus (ATV).

GOOD NEWS



Old Oak Common Station Image: HS2

Good news for Europe’s largest civil engineering project, High Speed 2 (HS2) passed another milestone in May as plans for its major hub station were approved after Prime Ministerial approval for the £100 Billion programme. Old Oak Common will be one of only four on the first leg of the line between central London and Birmingham. It is planned to open in 2029 and will eventually cater for 250,000 passengers a

day. It will be the biggest newly-built station in the UK. Other stations, such as

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Waterloo, are bigger but only after having been incrementally extended over the decades. Old Oak Common will also be the country's second busiest station, in terms of passenger numbers, ultimately accommodating 90 million people a year, putting it behind only Waterloo. Old Oak Common station is to be built at the site of a former Great Western Railway depot and will cost £1.3 billion. Ground-work is underway prior to the building work, scheduled to start in the autumn.

The general good news is that corona virus infections are fewer this month than last. While this is good news, the not-so-good news is that while this reduction means fewer deaths, we are not out of the woods just yet. More good news is that the testing regime is also improving but is still not as fast or reliable as needed. At least something is out there so we can call this our Agile approach to testing. Probably not, as we know the requirements, just can't get the technology right – perhaps we just don't know enough about the virus? This should lead on to some learned consideration of Rumsfeld's unknowns, but you all probably know this already – we are now in the domain of unknown unknowns.

This is certainly good news time for pharma projects with over 100 projects examining potential vaccines in five different lines. Perhaps the most promising seem to be the re-purposing of existing drugs with retro-virals developed to slow HIV infections seemingly in the lead. Pharma projects usually take many years to complete and are frequently run as a programme to identify likely candidates from a very large number of starters so the re-purposing approach can cut many years off development time as these drugs are already licenced for use.

Several candidate drugs are in clinical trials, in UK, USA and elsewhere. The UK Medical and Healthcare products Regulatory Authority introduced fast track routes for development and clinical trials in mid-March. The University of Oxford Vaccine Group work moved into Phase 1 trials in healthy adult volunteers in mid-April after successful trials on monkeys. More than 1,000 immunisations have been completed and follow-up continues. Calls for participants in 3 groups (56 – 59 year-olds; over 70 year-olds and children between 5 and 12 years old) for Phase 2 trials was issued on 22 May. The phase 3 part of the study involves assessing how the vaccine works in a large number of people over the age of 18. This group will assess how well the vaccine works to prevent people from becoming infected and unwell with COVID-19. No date has been announced for the Phase 3 trial but preliminary results are expected in mid-July

Pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca announced a \$1.2 billion deal with the US government to produce 400 million doses of the as yet unproven coronavirus vaccine first produced in the Oxford Vaccine Group lab. Astra has received more than \$1bn of financial support from the US Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority for the development, production and delivery of the vaccine. It is expected to supply 30 million doses to UK in September. The global licensing agreement between the Oxford based developers and Cambridge-based Astrazeneca, covers the commercialisation and manufacturing of the vaccine, which still needs to pass safety and efficacy tests.

Further international collaboration is taking place between GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) and French rival Sanofi. Under this arrangement, GSK and Sanofi have been working

on a treatment to test on humans during the second half of this year with the aim of making a vaccine available early next year later if the project succeeds and regulators grant approval. Press reports claim that Sanofi will bring to the partnership a Covid-19 antigen — a molecule that helps the body to produce antibodies — that it is developing. GSK will contribute its adjuvant technology, which boosts an antigen's potency. According to the Times, smaller doses become more effective and may mean that more vaccine doses can be manufactured. Meanwhile, the UK's first dedicated vaccine plant is being fast-tracked to bring it on-line by early 2021 to produce "tens of millions" of doses to guard against coronavirus.

Other fast track projects include a one-hour test approved for roll out last month, rival vaccine development at Imperial College London and another at the Cambridge viral zoonotics laboratory. Each is taking a different approach and there is some indication that different development teams are sharing information.

On an entirely different front comes news of new British Standards developments. In addition to its work with the ISO development team to update the 21500 family of International Standards, the British Standards Institution (BSI) has begun work on two important new standards. Drafting teams at BSI began work last month on a specification for Project Controls and a guide to Benefits Management. Work is at an early stage, but it is clear that these two Standards will complement BS 6079 by amplifying important aspects not covered in existing work either nationally or internationally.

BAD NEWS

Despite the opening Good News, it is more common to find HS2 in this section and this month is no exception. Despite the best efforts of the management team, the impression everyone gets is of a programme that is badly behind schedule and over budget. The latest bleat from the Public Accounts Committee, the House of Commons spending watchdog, claims that progress has been mis-reported with HS 2 Ltd failing to disclose evidence of the financial situation for about eight months so that the Ministry for Transport (DfT) were unaware of the true situation. The highly critical report accused project leadership of lacking the appropriate skills to manage the programme.



HS2 – Artists impression. Image: East Midlands Business Link

In the past month or so, apart from the cost and delay claims, the press has reported legal challenges to the tunnelling plan as well as continuing challenges by so called eco fascists and letter writers in attempts to undermine confidence on the programme. The latest efforts claim that the scheme is irrelevant compared to the pandemic. As usual, no evidence is provided by the letter writers. The tunnels challenge is more substantive with rival groups of lawyers bringing experts in to have their say on the risk to a key feature near St Pancras Station. The latest development is a court order to The High Court yesterday told HS2 Ltd to furnish the challenger with clearer information over the “three tunnels” design in the form of the results of ground investigations into the retaining wall and how it would be protected from the tunnels below. It must also produce an environmental impact assessment report. Apparently, the company must better explain the structure and support systems it plans in relation to the tunnels. The area in question is near Regents Park, a very expensive part of London, so property prices are quite high. Decisions have not yet been announced.

COULD BE GOOD OR BAD NEWS

For the past few years, visitors to London have seen one of the major tourist sites swathed in wrappers as work plods on to bring the building up to date. The full programme is budgeted at about £4 billion – not much when set against the money already thrown at the coronavirus situation but a hefty lump nevertheless.



Image: Mark Kerrison/Alamy

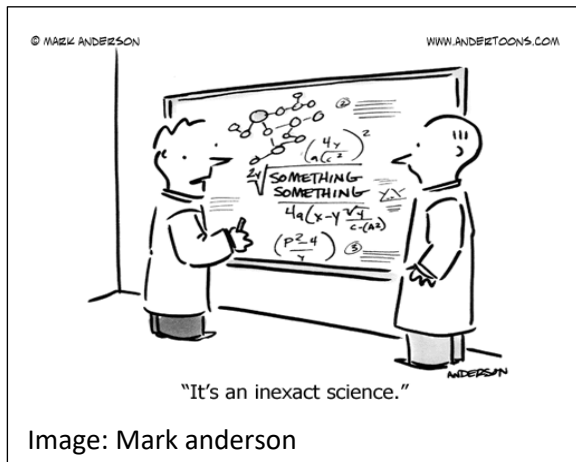
The programme is led by David Goldstone, appointed in January as CEO of the new body tasked with restoring the Palace of Westminster. Previously CEO at MoD, he will be joined by Mike Brown who leaves his job with Transport for London (TfL) shortly. Mr Brown had a bumpy ride at TfL where he was accused of playing down the Crossrail delays. Brown and Goldstone will have a “sponsor board” responsible to Parliament for keeping the project on budget and on time. Curiously I thought this was the responsibility of the Project Manager but perhaps I am just old fashioned. They may have their work cut out as there are reports in the press that plans could be torn up as a result of the “altered political and economic landscape” caused by the coronavirus outbreak. Partly this arises from the working from home undertaken by Members before the partial reopening of the Houses of Parliament last month.

The Chancellor and the Prime Minister are also understood to be concerned about embarking on a multibillion-pound “vanity project” in London amid a deep economic slump and Boris Johnson’s election pledges to “level up” other parts of the country. A strong case for doing the work on safety grounds alone exists. The palace is in a very poor state of repair, with sewage leaks, vermin, water dripping on old wiring, asbestos dust, a decrepit heating system and non-existent disabled access. According to the National Audit Office, nearly £400 million has been spent on maintenance since 2016, and there is an increasing backlog of repairs estimated at over £1 billion.

Sarah Johnson, chief executive of the sponsor body, said: “The impact of the health crisis on public finances and parliament’s ways of working has made it even more essential that we review both the strategy for relocating the two houses and the scope of the restoration of the palace.”

LESSONS LEARNED

The Great British Public, better known to the Press as the man on the Clapham Omnibus (for international readers, this is a reference to a notional reasonable person used as a test of evidence in English criminal courts) is learning some useful lessons, starting with the notion of modelling – apparently it came as a major shock to the Press



Corps that the models supporting virus plans are mostly “educated guesses”. All models and virtually all plans are based on guesses, some better than others. The better ones are confirmed by evidence but in the absence of evidence, “we” fall back on what we consider reasonable, based on our knowledge of other, possibly similar, situations, principles learned in school, university or from experience. What we have here is evidence of the unreasonable demand for certainty when none can exist and a lack of understanding of variables.

While this is something we Project Managers know, and brief to our clients, sponsors and other “interested parties” (as ISO call stakeholders), Joe Public and the Press were surprised that clarity is not always possible.

Avid cricket fans have been greatly relieved to learn that the first competitive match took place just as last month ended. A T20 match was played in Guernsey and drew some 84,000 viewers on You Tube. This reminds me that Cricket can fast track too, and I don't just mean the bowlers. The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) controls the game in England from its HQ at Lords in north London. The ground has a capacity of about 28,000 but plans have been afoot for several years to increase this to 31,000 by means of redevelopment of two existing stands. Planning permission for a rapid build design was granted last year and is intended to minimize disruption international fixtures.



New stands at Lords either of the Media Centre (Image MCC)

But how to fund the £50 million project? The development work was expected to be financed from existing reserves and revenue from the next few years. The MCC is

currently debt free and members want to keep it that way to avoid any threats to its independence.

One way is to draw on existing contingency funds held by the MCC. The existing 23,000 members are to be told details of funding proposals shortly but the pandemic has hit membership fees and match day income. One way round this is to maximise membership numbers. So a whizzo scheme has been devised to ensure membership fees do not fall short. Under this plan, aspirant members could bypass the usual 26 year waiting list by paying additional fees: those on the waiting list might be able to buy a life membership on a sliding scale from £7,000 to £80,000 based on their age. This fast track approach needs to be confirmed at the electronic AGM later this month. Some cynics might suggest that the notoriously conservative membership may well not have the tech skills to handle an on-line AGM so the voting may be stacked! All in all, a good example of stakeholder management in these troubled times and an interesting reaction to fast tracking.

CLOSING REMARKS

And to close, I thought you would be interested in another successful project. You may recall that last month we reported on the successful reintroduction of common Cranes (the birds, not the mechanical monsters). Well, hot on the heels of that success comes news that Project Stork has delivered! For the first time in centuries, White Storks have successfully hatched a brood at Knepp in West Sussex. The nest apparently held a clutch of 5 eggs but the monitoring team has not reported how many have hatched. This is especially heartening as the same pair laid eggs last year, but they failed to hatch. Records show that the last successful breeding pair in the wild in Britain nested on St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh in 1416.

The chicks are a victory for the White Stork Project, which was disappointed when eggs believed to be from the same pair failed to hatch last year. The alliance of private landowners and conservation groups responsible for bringing the female over from Poland in 2016 hopes to have 50 breeding pairs in southern England by 2030.

We keep hearing about the new normal as life slowly returns after the easing of lockdown. Today, I saw 3 planes on the early run into Heathrow, a sure sign we are returning to usual travel patterns. Further, road traffic has been increasing day by day. I think I preferred the early days of lockdown!

I've saved the best till last – we can all come out of our lockdown bunkers! Not because the virus is over, but a life changing asteroid missed our planet! Now isn't that something to smile about?

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 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 is currently 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. 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.