

UK Project Management Round Up ¹



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INTRODUCTION

This may be the “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” according to John Keats but as I sit at my desk surveying the grounds of Chateau Shepherd, all I see about me are grey clouds, puddles, fallen leaves and rain. This gloomy outlook is possibly a reflection of the state of the country as good news is in distinctly short supply. There is some but you will find it at the end of this month’s outpouring. On the bad news side, there is plenty to report. England is following Wales and Scotland into lockdown so the run up to the year-end festivities is looking pretty bleak. As you might imagine, two topics dominate the PM World in UK this month and neither present much in the way of good news. There is also news about HS2 and new nuclear; I’ll close with a summary of other snippets that show the way for project managers in years to come.

HIGH SPEED 2

The latest threat to High Speed 2 involves ancient forests. They don’t grow quickly enough to directly threaten any encroachment but according to the Woodland Trust some 68 ancient woodlands are threatened by the programme. More to the point, HS2 is proposing to cut down these woods in a series of acts that also threaten wildlife habitats. In phase 1, the London to Birmingham link, 21 ancient woods, covering a combined area of 409ha, will suffer direct loss (this may be a euphemism for being cut down but the meaning is not clear) with a further 12 are at risk from noise, vibration and further infrastructure such as roads.

Interestingly, the challenge has been built around not just complete woods but individual trees in an appeal to British sentiment over well established environments. The challenge cites three ancient trees being lost with another 16 lying within 200m.

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Later website postings claim more than 100 woodlands are under threat, probably not all from HS2.

In response, HS2 claim that protesters are focusing on small scale of loss caused by Europe's largest infrastructure project. According to Natural England's Ancient Woodland Inventory, there are 366,060 hectares of ancient woodland. The 58 hectares affected amount to less than 1% of the total.



Image: *The Times*

The past month has seen the felling of the 250 year-old Cubbington Pear Tree, the second oldest in the country, to make way for the new railway line. Protestors had campaigned for a tunnel under the woods but HS2, not surprisingly, rejected that because of the projected cost at £46 million.

HS2 continues to receive a bad press, exemplified by the banner head-line that it is £800M over budget despite the “reset” six months ago. Recent government reports warn of new “cost pressures” caused in part by protest action over land clearances between London and Birmingham for Phase 1. Additionally, other challenges including the need to remove more asbestos from buildings than previously thought. Additional complications on the design of HS2’s southern terminus at Euston have also driven up anticipated costs, it emerged.

Despite all this, there is intense demand for HS2 to be extended. I reported last month on the North Eastern extension and now we learn that an East Midlands extension has the support of the PM (our illustrious leader, not the project manager). So the saga will rumble on for the foreseeable future.

NEW NUCLEAR

Power generation continues to be a major concern as winter draws on and the need to keep the home fires burning occupies more of the collective mind. With the strategic option of extending the current range of nuclear power stations seeming less and less likely to succeed in the light of financing difficulties, we can be cheered by the news that the Government is thinking about taking equity stakes in new nuclear programmes such as Sizewell C. **Kwasi Kwarteng**, Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth, said that an energy white paper expected next month would include a broad commitment to more nuclear power. It is not clear how new plants would be funded and this remains a question for further debate.

The option of using a regulated asset base (RAB) model to support private investment in new nuclear plants would still result in the multibillion-pound liabilities showing on the government's balance sheet so the Treasury was studying the model to see whether the government should have equity stakes in such projects so that it could have "upside" from its commitment. It seems to me, highly unlikely that there is an upside to this "investment"!

Plants such as Sizewell C are run on fission reactors but the long-term energy solution has, for many years, been seen as fusion. So it is good news that the MAST upgrade (Mega Amp Spherical Tokamak) project completed at the end of October after seven years and at a cost of £55m.



MAST at Culham Centre for Fusion Energy, Oxfordshire.

Image: UKAEA

Fission reactors splits a heavy chemical element such as uranium, into produce lighter ones, releasing huge amounts of heat which can be concerted into electric power. Nuclear fusion mimics the processes of the Sun to combine two light elements to make a heavier one. The significant advantage of fusion over fission is that it produces no long-lived radioactive waste. Successful fusion reactors could transform the power industry by producing low cost, clean power thus eliminating one of the major climate crisis contributions.

The tokamak uses magnetic fields to confine plasma inside a vessel. This plasma allows the light elements to fuse and yield energy. Most tokamaks are shaped like a doughnut. But in Mast Upgrade, the size of the doughnut's hole has been reduced as much as possible, giving the plasma an almost spherical profile.

Constructed at the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy, the European HQ for susion work. The Centre is home to both Mast Upgrade and the JET (the Joint European Torus). JET is a long running development and uses the more conventional design. The JET approach is the forerunner of the international fusion machine ITER. This latter project is one of the world's biggest science experiments, which will demonstrate fusion at scale. Researchers at Culham have been exploring a parallel track.

Prof Ian Chapman, chief executive of the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) said *"We've been thinking about a pathway to fusion power plants which allowed for smaller, and therefore cheaper builds. That will hopefully allow quicker penetration into energy markets. That's the genesis behind the spherical tokamak,"*

UK Science Minister **Amanda Solloway** said: "We want the UK to be a world leader in fusion energy and to capitalise on its amazing potential as a clean energy source that could last for hundreds of years.

"Backed by £55m of government funding, powering up the Mast Upgrade Device is a landmark moment for this national fusion experiment and takes us another step closer towards our goal of building the UK's first fusion power plant by 2040."

COVID NEWS

Lockdown – UK readers will need no reminder about the impact of the Covid virus and the measures national Governments have taken. England, Scotland and Wales each have their own approach to the second wave, but they differ only in detail. All rely on some form of tracing the contacts of confirmed Covid positives contact, self-isolation and where an infection hot-spot is identified, some form of lockdown. Recently, we have seen a more granular approach but this has not proved successful, so England and Wales have opted for longer, so-called circuit breaker lockdowns.

Leadership – There is evidence of virus fatigue, the boredom and tedium of isolation and some of the population is reluctant to follow the rules. This attitude of needing "certainty" in the most uncertain times we have been through is a challenge that many in the project world understand. It is a test of leadership and requires both courage and careful planning to manage. Few citizens want the restrictions the Government feels necessary and the Government itself is reluctant to adopt what many see as a solution that affects the economy badly, to say nothing of the impact on mental health.

The solution is to turn to the world of project management and look at how we manage to engage stakeholders. Charismatic leadership is unhelpful but calm, consistent and time communication reassures stakeholders. It has been instructive to see the difference between the UK Prime Minister and the First Minister of Scotland and their teams. Boris and his Ministers have been all gung-ho claiming world beating solutions only to see them fail time after time. Nicola has been calm, consistent and demonstrated understanding, note that her Ministers have had little to say. Carry the stakeholder with you is the message.

Vaccine Trials – these continue round the globe with various degrees of success. We have had two trials paused while unexpected results have been investigated and a variety of existing medicines trialed as potential treatments, none have been identified as the all-conquering solution so it looks like the trials will run for a few more months.

Testing – one more successful line of attack has been the improvement in testing. There are several promising projects running including one that claims to identify the virus in seconds (see reports at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-54718848>) . Testing capacity has improved immeasurably in the last 3 months but results can take days and so the self-isolation comes too late to be effective. There are at least 5 trials running to develop and roll out effective and rapid testing.

Apps – we live in a world of apps so it is to be expected that Covid would trigger a minor tsunami of apps and so it has proved. The problem remains one of reliability and effectiveness. In an agile development world, we are used to seeing incomplete apps that are improved as time goes by. There is some evidence of this in the tracing apps deployed over the last couple of months – there have been many press reports of apps that had major flaws that were only discovered once deployed. Design limitations can be expected but flaws of the level experienced in England are a major project management failure which contributes to the weary ness of the population and makes stakeholder engagement more difficult.

Finally – life is not easy for any of us in these testing times but project managers have a major responsibility, from getting working apps out, through developing effective tests to fast tracking a vaccine to bring the virus under control. The world needs our skills and expertise to support the technical experts doing their best to bring us through a particularly difficult time.

BREXIT

And the other major topic is Brexit. We have been told by the Prime Minister to prepare for a no-deal exit. A few days later, negotiators concluded a trade agreement with Japan, to little fanfare but a great sigh of relief. The we learn that M Barnier, the EU Chief Negotiator is remaining in London as a deal is close. But we also hear that the French are prepared to block any deal unless they get a major slice of British fish quotas.

It is difficult to know where we're at with so many conflicting reports. Irrespective of the Covid situation, the biggest issue facing UK is Brexit. Many people in the country share the opinion of **Lord Sedwill**, or Sir Mark as he is probably better known. He was head of the civil service (as Cabinet Secretary) and head of security, two difficult jobs

calling for a great deal of diplomatic skill. In an interview with Christina Lamb, in *The Times*, he is reported as saying

“I think the rest of the world is puzzled that a country that was always engaged in the world has had, in the last decade, a period of introspection where we considered our own national identity. It’s not what people expected.”

Lord Sedwill was referring not just to the 2016 Brexit vote but also the 2014 vote on Scottish independence.

SHORT REPORTS

And now for some shorter comments, starting with HS1 – the link to the Channel Tunnel. The 68-mile route from London through Kent is fully electric – all trains and stations are now operated using wind and solar power. The line serves cross-Channel Eurostar trains and domestic Southeastern high-speed services. Until HS2 opens, it is the only dedicated high-speed line in the UK. According to reports in *The Times*, only about 40 per cent of the UK network is electrified, which allows cleaner electric trains to operate. This compares with between half and two thirds in countries such as France, Spain, Italy and Germany.

Housing Secretary, **Robert Jenrick**, announced that new methods of house construction are needed. He stated that modern methods of construction need to be “a significant part of our future housing investment plans and indeed of the spending review later this year”. He was referring to factory-built houses – what older readers might recognise as “pre-fabs”. These were the answer to the post war housing shortage but the technology has moved on since then. China already makes extensive use of factory built housing.

Mr Jenrick said that an increase in offsite construction would help to tackle a shortage of skilled construction workers as Britain leaves the European Union. It should also contribute to improving the sector’s equality and gender balances.

CLOSING REMARKS

I opened with a winge about autumn but it is actually a time of year that I enjoy as it is when we see bird migration. I hear increasing numbers of “rarities” sightings. Rarities are birds that are not endemic or to UK or migrants. What we are seeing is birds that are blown off track by adverse weather or simply get lost and end up here. It can be taken as a sign of climate change!

I said earlier that there was precious little good news around but I spotted a couple of items: first, the World Rowing Federation has dropped its use of the French version of its name (*Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d’Aviron*) although I do not understand quite why they have done this!

Abbreviations are part of the life blood of project managers so news that project managers and Prime Ministers share the tile of PM is mildly amusing but for me, the replacement of PC as politically correct Pre Covid makes my day. And finally, as every PM knows, every silver lining has a cloud! Enjoy your lockdown and stay safe.

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 35 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. His consulting work has taken him to Japan, Taiwan, USA and Russia. 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 was, for seven years, 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 is currently Chairman of the British Standards Institute project management committee. 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.