

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



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### INTRODUCTION

It is always pleasing to start with something good although whether you agree with my optimism is something else entirely. Anyway, to the point, the United Kingdom is coming out of national lockdown and moving to a more nuanced response. Personally, I've always liked nuanced, sounds rather grown up and sophisticated. This more adult stance should let us to be trusted to behave responsibly so I am hoping for a near normal Christmas – more on this later.

The news this month is much the same as last month, in outline at least, and revolves around COVID-19 and BREXIT. There is other news, of course, so you can be reminded of some of the lessons Project Managers can pass on to our colleagues, friends, families and even politicians. I'll be looking at the two major topics plus more medical good news, some not so good news including a reflection on the world of Agile IT development and closing with some seasonal items.

### COVID-19 – Some *mostly* GOOD NEWS

The most obvious good news as far as COVID is concerned is the progress with vaccines to prevent infection. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), there are more than 200 COVID vaccine programmes underway around the World. Some are being run by well known big pharma firms, others by start-ups and yet others by university research departments. We have had a variety of reports over the last few months, keeping us in touch with progress, problems and possibilities, so many commentators have not said much recently. We have even had two of the best-known pharma companies reminding us that vaccine development usually takes a long time. Thus it is a nice surprise to learn that some competitors in the race to develop an effective and safe treatment are doing so well.

In the past month, we have had not one result, but four! First out of the block was the team from **Pfizer and Biontech** who weighed in with an effective rate of 90%. They

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were followed a few days later by similar news from US company **Moderna**, also claiming 90+% effectiveness. Next in line was the so-called Sputnik 5 vaccine from Russia's **Gamaleya Research Centre**, claiming 92% immunity. Last, but not least was the **AstraZeneca and Oxford University** vaccine. This latter vaccine claims between 70 and 90% effectiveness.

All these results are promising, as Prof **Charles Bangham**, chair of immunology at Imperial College London, said the results "provide further reassurance that it should be possible to produce an effective vaccine against Covid-19". Prof Bangham went on to say that proper evaluation of the safety and efficacy of all the vaccines is needed when full data on the trials is published. Others, including University of Edinburgh's **Prof Eleanor Riley**, worried that data had been rushed out too soon.



Image: Reuters



Image: Times of India

Certainly, the challenges following the AstraZeneca/Oxford press release seems to support a cautious view. Questions are being asked about their vaccine trials since it was revealed that a small set of participants received less than a full dose initially, followed later by a full dose. The *Independent* newspaper reports AstraZeneca's chief executive **Pascal Soriot** admitting that they need to carry out "additional study" to validate the efficacy data they have released. Three data sets were reported: an overall efficacy of 70%, a lower one of 62% and a high of 90%. The AstraZeneca vaccine requires 2 injections about a month apart. They claim that different doses of the vaccine were mistakenly used in the trial. Some volunteers were given shots half the planned strength, in error. Yet that "wrong" dose turned out to be a winner.

**Prof David Salisbury**, WHO Director of immunisation until he joined the Chatham House think tank, said: "You've taken two studies for which different doses were used and come up with a composite that doesn't represent either of the doses. I think many people are having trouble with that." AstraZeneca stressed that the data are preliminary, rather than full and final - which is true for the Pfizer and Moderna results too. The BBC claim this is science by press release.

However, we now have some reason for optimism but as has become the new normal, people still want "clarity", as they are largely unable to understand the simple mathematics underlying the trial results. At least the Government seems confident as they have sent both the Pfizer and AstraZeneca drugs to the Medical and Health products Regulatory Authority (MHRA) as first steps towards roll-out. As we close for publication, there have been press reports that the National Health Service (NHS) has been told to prepare for mass vaccinations from 7 December. This does NOT mean that any vaccines have been granted regulatory approval in UK.

As a reminder, the trials process and WHO reported progress is shown in the table below:

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Limited	Approved
38	17	13	6	0
Vaccines testing safety and dosage	Vaccines in expanded safety trials	Vaccines in large scale efficacy trials	Vaccines approved for early/limited use	Vaccines approved for full use

It looks like Pfizer and AstraZenica are moving from Phase 3 to Phase 5, not passing through Stage 4. Word is that Sputnik 5 has already moved to Phase 5 and of course, there is a Chinese vaccine on general release.

### COVID-19 – Some BAD NEWS

While everyone has been focusing on the health aspects of the pandemic, life does go on. As they say, death and taxes are always with us, so the cancellation of the Chancellor's Autumn Statement came as no surprise. Chancellor **Rishi Sunak** clearly has other weighty matters on his mind. Many would consider this a welcome relief but bills have to be paid and the Government has already spent £280bn on measures to fight Covid-19 and its impact on the economy. Planned borrowing for the financial year to April 2021 is forecast to be £394bn, according to the Office of Budget Responsibility. This is the highest figure ever seen outside wartime. If you want to see the full story, the National Audit Office has helpfully provided a COVID-19 Cost Tracker (<https://www.nao.org.uk/covid-19/cost-tracker/>).

At a less scary level, we learn that another financial impact is in the construction industry supply chain where contractors are off loading risk on their suppliers. Not surprisingly, there is a call for Government intervention. Reports in *The Times* show that these risks are mainly around project delay and productivity reduction due to social distancing requirements and now restrictions such as further lockdowns. There are also widespread fears that business insurance will not cover such risks.

### BREXIT

The good news as far as BREXIT is concerned is that we are still talking. This is news because a few weeks ago, we weren't – **M Michel Barnier**, the European Union Chief Negotiator went home to isolate for a week, not because he was fed up with negotiating but he had been exposed to the virus. I am glad to report that he has emerged from his isolation unscathed and ready to take up where he left off. It is not entirely clear just where he and his British counterpart **Lord Frost** actually are, but they have a lot to discuss, such as fisheries, access to British waters and free movement, which seems to be a sticking point.



Lord Frost (left) & Michel Barnier (right) meeting for the latest round of trade talks Image: Reuters

Possibly more serious is the situation whereby Lord Frost is using existing EU legislation to block the import of uncooked prepared meat products from the EU. To you and me, this means that we will no longer be permitted to acquire Bratwursts and Polish spiced sausage. Fans of the 1980s sitcom *Yes Minister* will appreciate the battle of the mandarins as EU regulations stating that such products cannot be imported into the bloc unless they are frozen to minus 18C. This potentially affects tens of millions of pounds worth of sausage meat, uncooked beef burgers and other products. The ban will also affect Northern Ireland, disrupting supply chains and preventing British-prepared raw meat from crossing the Irish Sea. The sting in the tail comes from the British response: a warning that if there is no agreement UK would implement its own ban. Such a ban would be particularly damaging to Ireland which in 2018 exported 335,000 tonnes of beef, pig, sheep and poultry meat worth €1.3 billion to the UK, part of which would be threatened.

In a response worthy of Sir Humphrey, a Whitehall source said *“It’s been pointed out that the government has committed to mirroring EU food safety legislation after we leave the bloc. That means if they ban it then we’ll ban it too.”* Talks continue...

## OTHER BAD NEWS

- **Skills Shortage.** As if the virus was not sufficient bad news for industry, we learn that rail projects are beset by a shortage of skilled young workers. Up to 120,000 extra workers will be needed over the next five to ten years according to research carried out by City Guilds and the National Skills Academy for Rail (NSAR). Peak demand is expected in 2025. Like many industries and construction in particular, the workforce is aging and only 16% are female. Research shows that some 15,000



rail staff will retire by 2025 and the impact of BREXIT also contributes to the shortage as fewer EC citizens are forecast to come in to UK to work.

- **Stonehenge Tunnel.** As forecast last month, the decision to authorize this mammoth project has been challenged and new legal wrangling continues. For those who missed the latest plan, the A303 will be widened into a dual carriageway and placed beneath the World Heritage Site. At present, the road runs just 165m from the stones. It is designed to improve views of the monument and significantly ease congestion on a busy route between London and the west country. Academics have called on the government to increase the length of the proposed road tunnel because of concerns that current plans “will decimate the World Heritage Site.” They claim the tunnel should be almost doubled in length to prevent the destruction of up to half a million artefacts.
- **Impact of WFH.** The new normal for many people, me included, is that we are working from home. Actually, I started WFH back in my days in AEA Technology some 20 years ago and find it significantly improved my productivity – fewer chums around to chat with. There is a downside, though, information flows are more structured and less critical gossip...oops, I mean “intelligence” is available. Another problem is the impact of WFH on the need for office buildings. My family firm spotted this shift coming 3 years ago and converted out managed offices into some rather snazzy apartments but the trend is catching on in a big way so that several of the big office development projects in London, and no doubt other cities throughout the country, look like their business case is pretty weak. Press reports indicate that 6 developments have been put on hold. Developers have put off starting new projects according to Deloitte’s biannual London Crane survey. Some 1.2 million sq ft of new development was started in the central business district compared with 2.8 million sq ft the previous year.

## **MORE GOOD NEWS**

As we get used to the effects of the pandemic, we are seeing some small improvements, particularly in virus testing. There are currently 4 types of test in use in UK: standard PCR, the original test which amplifies a small sample of genetic material by a series of temperature changes; RT-Lamp test in which machines pick up genetic material without the need for the series of temperature changes needed by the PCR Test; Saliva Lamp Test which use the same technology as the RT-Lamp test but with a single sample, rather than both a throat and nasal sample; and now we have the Lateral Flow test which is fast, less invasive and does not require the services of a laboratory. Do we have an advanced example of an incremental development here?

I have to say the categorisation of this next item depends on where you are coming from but I think the Chancellor of the Exchequer, **Rishi Sunak** did have some welcome news in his Spending Review. It is important to note this is not to be confused with the Autumn Statement, which has been cancelled this year, that would have been a month or two earlier. Big winners will be Defence where an extra £7bn allocation was announced by the PM (our illustrious leader, you understand) and the NHS who get another £3bn. Interestingly, although you don’t get many aircraft carriers for £7bn, spending will cover some interesting developments.

According to **Fenella McGerty**, from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "the announcement takes us further down the path of focusing on technology rather than personnel". She told BBC Reality Check: "Defence investment and research and development expenditure make up 22% of our defence budget, which compares favourably with other countries." UK spend on defence as a proportion of GDP (2.33%) is a little less than Australia (2.35%) and a little more than France (2.16%) but not in the same league as USA (3.55%) or Russia (4.14%).

The Prime Minister said the funding will allow investment in new technology such as:

- A new centre dedicated to artificial intelligence;
- The creation of a national cyber force, which he said was already operating against terrorists, organised crime groups and hostile states;
- A new "RAF space command launching British satellites and our first rocket from Scotland in 2022".

"From aerospace to autonomous vehicles, these technologies have a vast array of civilian applications, opening up new vistas of economic progress, creating 10,000 jobs every year - 40,000 in total - levelling-up across our country and reinforcing our union."

There are many opportunities for advanced programme and project management here. The Ministry of Defence doesn't have a strong track record of balancing its project books, now has to prove it can spend wisely.

## **MEDICAL GOOD NEWS**

COVID-19 is not the only threat on the medical horizon. Quite a lot of effort has gone into repurposing drugs already approved for widespread use in the search for COVID treatment. You may recall that President Trump touted several drugs that he claims can help tackle the outbreak. Several drugs designed for other uses have been found to be effective in treating COVID-19.

Trials continue and there is considerable hope for Upadacitinib. When used in combination with conventional treatments, it has been found to reduce the symptoms of severe rheumatoid arthritis in almost two thirds of patients. It has been approved by the UK's drug watchdog, providing hope that sufferers could go into "remission" from the condition.

Shades of Big Brother comes with the news that someone has developed a smartphone that can tell when you are not taking enough exercise. We all know about things like FitBit and the like that count how many steps you have taken but this goes much further and actively nags you to be more active. This is just one manifestation of AI that is being deployed in an NHS technical revolution in a £50million trial. A range of 42 new health-tech products have won an AI Health and Care award, out of 530 submissions. Artificial intelligence in hospitals is expected to revolutionise treatment, with wearable patches detecting irregular heartbeats, which in turn could help to prevent heart attacks and strokes. Another app uses phones to detect albuminuria, an early warning sign of chronic kidney disease, which could help patients with diabetes. Good news, without doubt.

## OTHER BAD NEWS

Not all the medical news is good. We hear that many less headline grabbing clinical trials are being delayed or even abandoned as priority, and funding, are diverted to defeating the pandemic. Analysis by Southampton University found that more than 1,500 clinical trials of new drugs and treatments had been permanently closed, while a further 9,000 had been suspended. According to Michael Head, who carried out the analysis, told *The Observer*. “This pandemic has knocked everything off track. Research gives us the knowledge we need to tackle illnesses in new ways, and if that doesn’t happen all areas of health will suffer.” Part of the problem is the difficulty in recruiting participants due to the effects of the COVID virus. A knock on impact is that trainee clinical researchers have fewer opportunities to learn and develop their careers and expertise.

A report in the *Times* notes that the Association of Medical Research Charities warned the sector expected a £310 million shortfall in medical research spending over the next year. The AMRC and its member charities have called on the government to commit to a Life-Sciences Partnership Fund, a co-investment scheme that provides a level of match funding for future charity research over the next three years. Cancer Research UK expects a planned £400 million research budget this year would have to be cut to £250 million. “That is £150 million of research on treatments with the potential to save or lengthen lives that will not now take place.”



It is a well-known fact of life that IT projects enjoy a poor reputation. We need not dwell on the reasons for this state of affairs but I sometimes wonder whether it is due in part to the tendency to blame the user for their errors. We constantly see

apps released that either do not work as touted, are insecure or just plain don't do what it says on the tin. An IT developer will tell you that many of the problems they encounter are down to the user being unable to say what they want. The cynic will say this is why we have Agile development. You don't need to make the app perfect, just so that it does something. Then you can take some more time and add a few bells and whistles and sell the result as an improved package and charge for it all over again. Personally, I take a more charitable view (well, I would wouldn't I – I've been a developer in my time) but it still makes me think and the news that senior police officers have lost confidence in the ability of the Home Office to complete big IT projects on time seems to confirm this view.

## SEASONAL COMMENT

The is the season of goodwill and so I could not resist bringing you the story of a conflict that still divides the British people. It concerns Brussel Sprouts and has nothing to do with BREXIT. Generations of children have rejected Brussel Sprouts as deeply unpleasant, mushy and generally unappetizing. Those of us who have always supported the little green wonder have borne the brunt of ridicule from those who claim

they need a long time to cook, so they are put on to boil sometime just after Thanksgiving in USA. The nation seemed split between supporters of eaters and rejectors. Well, now it seems the eaters have won the battle as this traditional accompaniment to Christmas have just been voted Britain's favourite green vegetable by a narrow margin over broccoli. The results analysis shows some generational differences, but top grocery chain Waitrose put this victory down to an image makeover. "Soggy boiled sprouts are a thing of the past, as customers create more adventurous side dishes" said Lucy Broughton, vegetable buyer for the chain.

## CLOSING REMARKS

There are two final pieces of news to round off this seasonal offering. First, a Royal project at Sandringham. My mind has boggled at the thought of HM The Queen needing permission to build anything on her own land but she applied for planning approval for an adventure playground in the grounds of her Sandringham home.



Image: Bay Media

Her great-grandchildren will be able to enjoy treehouses, a zip wire, swings, slides and a walkway in the forest canopy. A highlight is the water tower which will be among the features of the area. Press reports speculate that the idea has been inspired by the Duchess of Cambridge's Back to Nature Garden that featured at the Chelsea Flower Show last year. That garden had a rope swing, a teepee hideaway and a treehouse to encourage

children to be enthused about nature. Sandringham Estate in Norfolk, which attracts 500,000 visitors a year, submitted the planning application to King's Lynn and West Norfolk council last month.

My final comment relates to a major project that is not even in UK. Readers will recall the perennial flooding problems faced by Venice. Alta Aqua regularly floods the ancient city and many solutions have been proposed, including glass walls to protect St Mark's basilica. One of the more controversial schemes was one to construct 78 raising barriers to control flood waters. The so-called MOSE project was mired in controversy from its inception and survived accusations of theft on a grand scale and corruption in high office.



St Mark's Square in 2019 Image: AP Photo/Luca Bruno

Recent Atlantic storms threatened further flooding with a forecast tide of 130 cm (4.27 ft), well below the devastating 187 cm tide that battered Venice last November, but enough to leave low-lying areas deep under water. The network of 78 bright yellow barriers that guard the entrance to the delicate Venetian lagoon lifted from the sea bed as the tide, driven by strong winds and rain, started to climb and as city mayor Luigi



Brugnaro said “Today, everything is dry. We stopped the sea,” before raising a glass in celebration with some of the engineers and officials responsible for the multi-billion euro project. Well done – a great way to end this 100<sup>th</sup> edition of your favourite on-line Journal! Merry Christmas!

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## About the Author



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