

UK Project Management Round Up¹



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INTRODUCTION

As I managed to miss the Editor's deadline last month, I'll report some of the major events I had planned to include as well as this month's major events in the UK project world. As usual, there is news, both good and bad and some that is difficult to classify. I had hoped we could avoid yet more on BREXIT but as COVID seems to be occupying less of the public imagination, relations with near neighbours receive greater scrutiny.

So this month, the conference season is taking shape, professional societies are more active and the Project Manager's fancy, like the young man's, lightly turns, not to love but new projects. Let's get the bad news, including BREXIT, out of the way so we can take an optimistic look at the world of projects.

BAD NEWS



Image: Shutterstock via The Architect's Journal

This type of news is all too prevalent and you do not need to look far for it. Infrastructure projects seem to be coming in for a lot of flak this past few months with bridges bearing the brunt of it so far. A report at the end of 2020 claimed half of UK's road bridges were in poor or very poor condition. Although this is not a project issue, some emergency repair work on key bridges, especially in London where the Hammersmith Bridge closure remains a major problem that has lasted for more

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than 2 years. Recent reports claim half of UK road bridges need emergency work.

Other issues that have a major impact on infrastructure projects involve the planning process. On our small and overcrowded island, you cannot build anything without planning permission. Regular readers may recall the furore over the Stonehenge tunnel planning approval last year and the vows of the uninformed to “wage war on shameful tunnel”. Planning began in 2015 with the announcement of the Government’s Road Investment Strategy, route option assessment in 2016 and statutory consultation in 2018. Since then, supplementary consultations took place in 2018 and a full public examination in 2019. Recommendations were published in 2020 and the fun began. First UNESCO challenged the decision, then the Druids offered their support to the tunnel and now we have challenges from the greens. To be fair, the greens are mounting legal challenges to all new road building schemes on the basis that Ministers are ignoring commitments to cut greenhouse gas emissions.



Image: Highways England

According to reports in *The Times*, papers have been in the High Court against the Department for Transport that could force the government to scale back plans to spend £27 billion on motorways and A-roads. *The Times* goes on to explain that existing roads policy, agreed in 2014, ignores more recent legally binding targets to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, including Paris Agreement commitments to cut carbon by 68 per cent by 2030 based on 1990 levels. In the case of the Stonehenge tunnel, this seems perverse as

one of the main reasons for moving the road is to prevent bottlenecks forming (see picture left) on the 1.5 mile stretch from the end of the dual carriageway to the Long Barrow roundabout. Given the Court’s ambivalent view of practical matters, I would expect them to side with the protesters. The planners will then counter with demonstrations that “prove” schemes reduce pollution. Ho-Hum!

Whether you think this next bit of tittle-tattle is bad news depends on whether you work in Parliament. The fabled Westminster re-vamp is certainly bad news for the Tax Payer as it is currently scheduled to cost not less than £4 billion (but the smart money is on anything between £10 and £20 billion!). Some degree of common sense is being shown by un-named MPs (Members of Parliament, nothing to do with those who provide police services for the military) who think it is political suicide to get taxpayers to foot the bill at a time when cuts and tax rises will be needed to pay for measures to alleviate the pandemic. The results of a “strategic review” sometime (originally promised for are due to be published early in the new year) are awaited. Of the many options under consideration are plans for housing both Houses, with the aim of shaving £1 billion off the budget. I would not like to re-baseline this project – and think of the impact on your Earned Value plots! Interestingly, the review is considering making more use of the Thames to access parliament. I wonder how much a new embankment, or cofferdam, in the river would cost...?

After all this doom and gloom, I'm sure you are looking forward to the Good News – but no, there is worse to come, in the form of BREXIT...

BREXIT

While we “successfully” left the European Union at the end of 2020, the problems have not gone away, influenced partly by the gross incompetence of the European Commission in the attempts to manage their vaccination programme. While negotiators would claim this has nothing to do with the problems now being encountered, the more mature project people have no doubt that stakeholder management has not been an area of strength on either side. As someone who has spent a lifetime working for peace and security in Europe and for closer international cooperation, this is profoundly depressing.

I had hoped sense would prevail in January when issues around international finance and cross border trade, particularly in Ireland looked to have been “managed”. Now we learn that Brussels, in the form of discredited President von der Layen, is threatening to “use its teeth” to enforce customs checks in Northern Ireland. Readers may recall that this is the person who moved from a particularly weak performance as Defence Minister in Germany and parked in Brussels. As if that was not enough, France threatened “brutal” reprisals against the City of London and manufacturing industries in a dispute over fishing licences for small French boats in the Channel. Perhaps it is no coincidence that UK awarded full diplomatic status to the EU ambassador two days after these threats.

GOOD NEWS

There really is some good news and you don't have to look too far to find it.

The Meteorological Office has begun a project, partnering with Microsoft, to build a new super-computer. The Met Office has form with heavy weight computing, having had 2 Cray XC40 super-computers, nicknamed Ronni and Reggie after the notorious Kray brothers supported by another single larger purpose built data storage. Together, these supercomputing systems:

- Are capable of over 14,000 trillion arithmetic operations per second – that's more than 2 million calculation per second for every man, woman and child on the planet.
- Contain 2 petabytes of memory enough to hold 200 trillion numbers.
- Contain a total of 460,000 compute cores. These are faster versions of those found in a typical quad-core laptop.
- Contain 24 petabytes of storage for saving data – enough to store over 100 years worth of HD movies

According to the Met Office, at the time of installation all three phases of this system appeared in the top 50 of the world's most powerful computers. This hugely complex

Government IT project was successfully completed in December 2016, delivered early and on budget. The Met Office's supercomputer capability currently remains one of the most powerful in the world dedicated to weather and climate but even more power is needed to help ensure communities can be better prepared for weather disruption, including through:

- More sophisticated rainfall predictions, helping the Environment Agency rapidly deploy mobile flood defences;
- Better forecasting at airports so they can plan for potential disruption; and
- More detailed information for the energy sector to help them mitigate against potential energy blackouts and surges.

The new system to which the UK Government is contribution £1.2 billion, is expected to be one of the top 25 supercomputers in the world when it is up and running in the summer of 2022. Microsoft plans to update it over the next decade as computing improves. *Morgan O'Neill*, assistant professor at Stanford University, who is independent of the project, said "This partnership is an impressive public investment in the basic and applied sciences of weather and climate. Such a major investment in a state-of-the-art weather and climate prediction system by the UK is great news globally, and I look forward to the scientific advances that will follow."

Still on the environmental front, Britain is down to its last coal fired power plant by the end of 2022. EDF has announced plans to close down the West Burton A Plant by September next year.



Image: Alamy

The last coal fired generator will then be Uniper's plant at Ratcliffe-on-Soar plant. Plans to close this plant before the government deadline to phase out unabated coal usage by October 2024.

According to the Times, phasing out coal power has been one of Britain's success stories in decarbonisation that Ministers are keen to trumpet as they push for global

commitments at this year's COP26 climate conference in Glasgow to cease building coal plants.

Elsewhere, work began last month on the Colne Valley Viaduct, a 2.1 mile long bridge across a series of lakes and waterways on the north west outskirts of London, will be nearly a mile longer than the Forth Rail Bridge and carry trains travelling at speeds of up to 200mph.



Image: HS2 and Grimshaw Architects

The structure will be supported by 56 piers, with the widest spans reserved for where the viaduct crosses the lakes, and narrower spans for the approaches. This design was chosen to enable views across the landscape, minimise the viaduct's footprint on the lakes and help to compliment the natural surroundings. Over the course of this year, engineers from HS2 Ltd's main works contractor, Align JV – a team made up of

Bouygues Travaux Publics, Sir Robert McAlpine and VolkerFitzpatrick – will construct 292 piles under the ground to support the viaduct piers.

Still more on environmentally friendly projects comes with the announcement that British Airways (BA) and Shell Ventures are investing \$24.3 million in hydrogen-electric flight specialist ZeroAvia to help accelerate the development of its first 50-plus seater zero emissions aircraft. So far, ZeroAvia have successfully tested the world's first full scale hydrogen fuelled plane in September 2020. The six-seater aircraft took off from Cranfield airport in Bedfordshire for a 19-mile demonstration flight powered by hydrogen fuel cell technology. ZeroAvia, the US-UK aviation company, is attempting to introduce zero-emission aircraft for commercial passenger operations, package deliveries and agriculture by 2023.

As we close for press, ZeroAvia reported that it's R&D aircraft made an emergency landing just outside the Cranfield airport perimeter in a field during a routine pattern test flight. No one was hurt and the incident has been reported to the Air Accidents Investigation Branch and the Fire Service attended on the ground, which is standard procedure. A spokesman said "The aircraft landed on its wheels, but the wing was damaged as it came to a halt at a low speed on uneven terrain". The aircraft has now been moved from the field and ZeroAvia will begin investigating the crash and analyzing data to find out what happened. The aircraft is part of the UK government's HyFlyer project, which ZeroAvia is working together with the European Marine Energy Centre and Intelligent Energy to research low carbon power for aircraft.



Image: Bedford Independent

COVID 19

UK is in the 18th week of our third lockdown and there are grounds for cautious optimism. We are no longer the worst performing nation in the world although it is sometimes difficult to compare as counting methods vary so much across national boundaries.

Numbers are well down from peak back in January when we hit 59,000 new cases in one day and the 7-day rolling average was 54,000 and this morning's case rate is 2,300. This drop is partly due to rapid roll out of vaccinations to groups based on mortality rates – elderly and care home residents first then by age groups but also owes much to the lockdown approach. One of the main aims in controlling infection rates has been achieved and the National Health Service has been able to cope with the number of cases that have needed hospitalization. Today there are 1,400 people with the virus in hospital which represents a fall of 30% on the previous week. New variants of the virus do not seem to be causing much concern despite the increase in numbers of the Indian variety, and this morning two specific types of Indian variant have been announced.

So far, so good, but now the pressure is easing, politics are raising their ugly head once again and the main parties are disputing the procurement approaches and process adopted. We all know the importance of supply chain management in projects and programmes so the outcomes here will be important lessons learned, especially where emergency programmes are concerned.

As I write, it is less than 2 weeks before the next, major step, in the reduction in restrictions. Then, pubs, gyms and other facilities will be able to operate in a more normal manner – a meal and a drink in a pub will be very welcome!

Professional News

The Government frequently comes in for a lot of flak about its ability to manage projects and programmes so the news that a Government Projects Academy is to be launched should be greeted with enthusiasm. *Lord Agnew*, Minister for Transformation and Efficiency, set out plans to transform the way the government trains and accredits project delivery professionals. A short video outlining proposals can be found here <https://vimeo.com/523847537/e2b879608e>

The Academy will provide a single, virtual hub for professional standards, accreditation and training for Project Delivery Professionals working across government. Along with a clear set of roles, competencies and skills, the Academy will provide professionals with a 'licence to practice' and access to a redesigned learning curriculum to support them in their roles and accreditation.

Quite how this new institution will fit into the wider UK project world is not clear. The Association for Project Management has a well-established set of role descriptions,

competence framework and a multilevel qualification scheme that culminates in its Chartered Project Professional (ChPP). Civil servants are already required to sit the specially developed degree course at Säid Business School prior to becoming Senior Responsible Officers.

Lord Agnew also announced the publication of several government “standards”, some new and some updated versions. The Government Project Delivery Framework (GPDF) sets out the core requirements to be met at key stages by major projects, programmes and portfolios in government (see the video here <https://vimeo.com/523847110/0d2a353c97>), This incorporates what it calls best practice guidance, such as the newly published Cost Estimating Guidance. All the documents are available for download from <https://www.gov.uk/government/latest?departments%5B%5D=infrastructure-and-projects-authority>. The role of these internal standards is far from transparent.

Amid all the Governmental activity, the Association for Project Management (APM) continues to active during lockdown. The webinar programme seems to have been well received and continues with 8 more webinars in May. SIG and Branches have also taken to the webinar and on-line presentation approach. One of the advantages of these events is that they provide more opportunity for members to participate both directly and asynchronously so missing an opportunity is less likely as the recordings are available for viewing at convenient times – and for repeat viewing if needed. Another feature is the Hub, celebrating its first anniversary in April. It is an online community designed exclusively for individual members. The Hub works rather like Facebook and has some lively exchanges.

All professional associations use Standards for their work. Some of these are purely internal, aimed at things such as making members aware of what is expected of them and others relate to personal conduct (usually in the form of ethics) and technical performance. There are also Standards setting bodies, of which the best known are the International Organisation for Standards (ISO) and the British Standards Institute (BSI). APM participates formally in standards development at the BSI level while many of those involved in both national and international standard development are also members of APM. However APM membership is not a requirement for participation and BSI are looking for new members of their MS/2 Project, Programme and Portfolio Management Committee (see <https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/about-bsi/uk-national-standards-body/how-to-get-involved-with-standards/become-a-standards-maker/> for details).

Current UK work includes developing new standards on project controls and benefits management. Both new standards will be issued for comment in the late summer or early autumn so look out for announcements. Meanwhile, new and revised international standards will be available in the summer.

CLOSING REMARKS

It has been a busy Spring with some major projects launching. Several of these cover transportation and energy and have long term implications for climate change. It will be interesting to see how these progress and how their planned benefits are managed. The new Government Project Academy seems to raise as many questions as it answers, particularly how it fits the civil service ethos in UK which so far has not embraced projects with the enthusiasm many would have expected. In these critical days as we emerge from the ravages of COVID-19, effective project management will be crucial. Enjoy the Spring!

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. 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.