

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



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### INTRODUCTION

The month of May started cold and damp, and the project world was much the same. However, we have just enjoyed a fine public holiday and similarly, the project world looks much rosier than expected. True, there is some bad news but that is outweighed by the good. So let's get the gloomy stuff out of the way first.

### BAD NEWS

The big problem in the headlines this month has been the shortage of building materials. Previously, the shortage of bricks has been the main focus, but this month has seen warning from the **Construction Leadership Council** that there are critical shortages in cement, some electrical components, timber, steel and paints. Similarly, the **Federation of Master Builders** reported that some of its members may have to delay projects and others could be forced to close as a result. Chief Executive Brian Berry said "Small, local builders are being hit hardest by material shortages and price rises".

There seem to be a number of factors causing the supply problems. Demand has shot up as lockdown began easing. "Unprecedented levels of demand" are set to continue. According to the Federation of Master Builders and reports on the BBC indicate significant increases in the number and size of construction projects that have led to skyrocketing demand for already scarce materials. Factors include the warmer winter affecting timber production in Scandinavia and the cold winter weather in Texas affected the production of chemicals, plastics and polymer. Trade with the Euro-Zone has also slowed, contributing to supply chain issues.

Other bad news is the Quarter 1 Trade figures. Press headlines manipulate the situation, with various reports of disastrous slumps, small improvements month on month making it difficult to understand just what is happening so it is usually best to

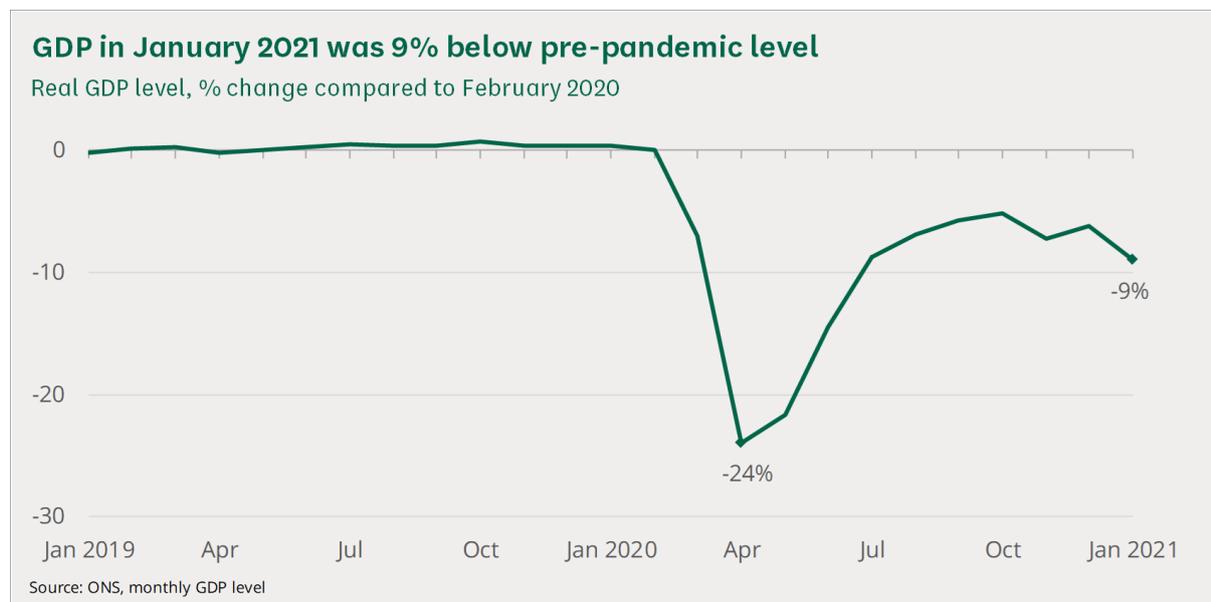
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<sup>1</sup> How to cite this work: Shepherd, M. (2021). UK Project Management Round Up, report, PM World Journal, Vol. X, Issue VI, June.

look at the Office for National Statistics ([www.ons.gov.uk](http://www.ons.gov.uk)) for clear guidance and trend analysis. The following highlights are from their Quarter 1 summary:

- Exports and imports of goods with the EU, excluding precious metals, increased by £1.0 billion (8.6%) and £0.8 billion (4.5%) respectively in March 2021; both driven by cars.
- Imports of goods from non-EU countries, excluding precious metals, increased by £1.5 billion (8.4%) in March 2021; mainly driven by imports of clothing.
- Exports of goods to non-EU countries, excluding precious metals, increased by £1.3 billion (9.9%) in March 2021; mainly driven by exports of cars.
- In Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2021, total imports of goods, excluding precious metals, were £14.5 billion (12.3%) lower than Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020, and is the first quarter since records began in January 1997 that imports of goods from non-EU countries are higher than from EU countries.
- In Quarter 1 2021, total exports of goods, excluding precious metals, were £7.0 billion (8.7%) lower than Quarter 4 2020.
- In Quarter 1 2021, the total trade deficit, excluding precious metals, narrowed by £8.4 billion to £1.4 billion.
- In Quarter 1 2021, trade in services imports were £13.4 billion (27.9%) lower than Quarter 1 2020, while exports were £10.4 billion (14.0%) lower.

Not all the news is bad and some of the less appealing numbers are down to the pandemic. Underlying causes are many and various, including BREXIT, to which I will return shortly, and the pandemic which has had a major impact as can be seen below.



There are, however, green shoots of recovery, as reported by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), the UK economy is likely to grow by 7.2% in 2021, up from its March projection of 5.1% - definitely not bad news but this is just a forecast.

Perhaps the real kicker is the report that UK is entering a third wave pandemic prompted by the Indian variant, oops, I mean Covid σ!

## **BREXIT**

The impact of BREXIT continues to damage the economy although it has not been reported widely in the Press. I reckon our Illustrious Leaser (aka OIL or Mr Johnson) has got off lightly as so many of the problems have been hidden by the pandemic. It is quite clear that the European Commission is working very hard to punish UK, hence the obstructive nature of the Northern Ireland situation, the rubbishing of UK products such as vaccines but demanding excessive supplies and unwillingness to refine regulations. This negativity is likely to run on for some time, as everyone gets used to the new normal. Let's hope no one is badly damaged in the process.

## **GOOD NEWS**

OK, that is the bad news – now we can look at the many good news items in the past month. I'll start with another Royal project – the **Queen's Green Canopy**. You should know that next year is HM The Queen's Platinum Jubilee and we will be celebrating 70 years of her reign. One whizzo scheme to mark this remarkable achievement is to plant trees. Herself has planted more than 1500 trees as these two pictures illustrate.



Early planting (Image Daily Mail)



It runs in the family (Flower Power Daily)

Although these show the Queen planting trees in UK, she has also planted a small forest around the world and now the project will enable people to plant trees in lots of different places including their own gardens, in schools, or cities as part of the scheme during tree-planting season from October 2021 through to the end of 2022, to mark her 70 years on the throne.

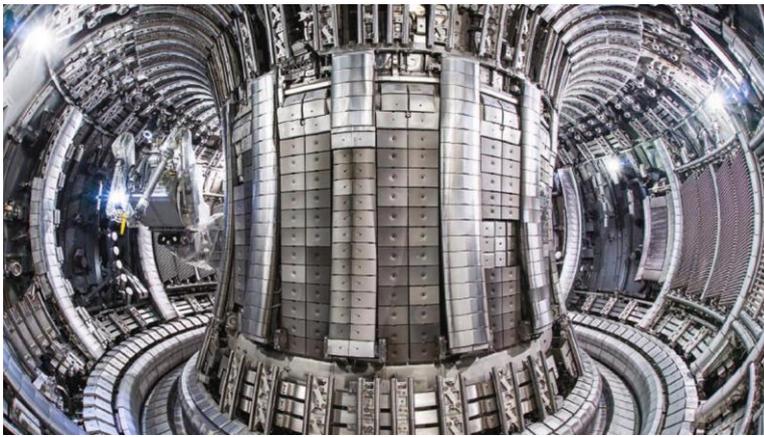
The Queen's Green Canopy (QGC) will see new trees planted, as well as ancient woodlands and forests protected. Schools and community groups will be able to bid for a share of three million free saplings from the Woodland Trust as part of the project.

A pilot training programme for unemployed young people aged between 16 and 24 to plant and manage trees will also be created and run through Capel Manor College, London's only specialist environmental college, of which the Queen Mother was

patron. Prince Charles encouraged people to "plant a tree for the jubilee. In other words, a 'tree-bilee'", he said in a video message.

**Nuclear Fusion.** News of a major step forward in the search for clean energy came from Britain's main nuclear fusion experiment at Culham in Oxfordshire as scientists announced that they can dissipate the heat of waste plasma — in theory allowing smaller, cheaper and more efficient nuclear fusion devices to be made.

"It is a success in one of fusion's biggest challenges," Professor Ian Chapman, chief executive of the UK Atomic Energy Authority, said. Fusion is a tantalising goal not just because it is clean, but because it is so high yield.



Hydrogen is heated by energising, electrifying and firing atoms at the mix, until atoms fuse  
CULHAM CENTRE FOR FUSION ENERGY

Current nuclear power plants utilise fission, which produces lots of heat but also leaves a sizeable waste legacy. Fission involves joining rather than splitting atoms, meaning there is almost no radioactive waste. To make it work requires maintaining temperatures in excess of 100 million degrees. Eventually some of that superheated plasma must be allowed to escape. When it does, if it

does not have time to dissipate its heat then it will very quickly blast its way through components. This is why the world's main prototype fusion reactor, ITER in southern France, is so big. Scientists are relatively confident that this decade ITER will manage to produce ten times as much power as it takes to run it. Make the reactor smaller and you also make it cheaper. Smaller reactors have the advantage that they also require smaller magnets to hold the plasma in place. The catch, though, has been the exhaust, which in a smaller device is spread across a smaller area.

And now for power of a different kind. Royal watchers will have seen the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge on their Scottish tour. While in Kirkwall they poured Scapa whisky over the blades of **Orbital O2**, the 2 megawatt generating tidal power barge. The 72m, 680-tonne hull has two 20m rotors attached, and generates enough electricity for 2,000 homes and offset around 2,200 tonnes of CO2 production per year. Launched in April from the Forth Ports quayside facility in Dundee into the River Tay using a submersible barge, the launch marked the



Orbital O2 Tidal Power barge. Image

completion of the turbine build, managed by TEXO Fabrication, and the O2. The barge was towed to the Orkney Islands where it is undergoing tests before being connected to the European Marine Energy Centre (EMEC). It will become the world's most powerful operational tidal turbine when commissioned.



The Association for Project Management (APM) has maintained its programme for senior practitioners. These members are known as Fellows: this is a membership level, not a qualification, reflecting experience as well as achievement. The programme, known as the **Fellows Forum** provides high level briefing on subjects ranging from post BREXIT political strategy through strategic oversight of major Government programmes, and policy briefings by the Confederation of British Industry. The latest Forum saw **Mark Thurston**, CEO of High Speed 2 briefing over 100 Fellows on current progress and likely challenges. Mark was joined by **Nick Elliott MBE** who played a key part in the vaccine rollout as Director General of the Vaccine Task Force, one of the Government's major successes in the battle against the pandemic. Both presenters responded to a wide-ranging series of questions for the Fellows.

**Apprentices** have played an interesting part in British history. In Elizabethan times, they formed a rebellious force that was quick to vent its anger, support various dubious causes and generally make a nuisance of themselves. They also played a critical part in the Guild system and have always represented workplace-based training. In modern times, apprenticeships are enjoying a resurgence as public opinion swings against university education that saddles a graduate with an average £50,000 of debt and brings no guarantee of a decent job at the end of it.

*The Times* commissioned a YouGov poll that found 42 % of people thought that an apprenticeship was a better preparation for life than university, seven times the number who believed a degree was the best start to life. This is in sharp contrast to the Blair government's arbitrary target of 50 % of school leavers should go to university. Popular scepticism is clearly shared by the government. **Gavin Williamson**, the education secretary, said this week that many students would be "better off" not going to university.

APM supports a number of apprenticeship schemes. In England, there are two apprenticeship standards for England that contain the APM Project Management Qualification (PMQ) – the Level 4 Associate Project Manager Apprenticeship and the Level 6 Project Manager Integrated Degree Apprenticeship. Those completing the Level 6 programme also receive a BA/BSc Project Management degree. Those based in Scotland or Wales take the Level 4 Higher Apprenticeship in Project Management. In August 2020, the UK government launched a new online and phone support service for apprentices who have lost their jobs during the Covid-19 outbreak. Employers with apprenticeship opportunities, and who are willing to take on a redundant apprentice, are also being encouraged to sign up to the new service to advertise their vacancies.

**Virgin Galactic announced its** first successful test flight in two years last month. While this lifted Virgin Galactic closer to its goal of becoming a space tourism pioneer, it also boosted its shares on a distinctly upward trajectory. The SpaceShipTwo-class VSS Unity craft flew to more than 55.45 miles above the Earth over the weekend.

Virgin Galactic hopes to send its first commercial passengers into orbit next year, with **Sir Richard Branson** expected to join the maiden flight within months. More than 600 people have signed up to fly with it into space. Each paid up to \$250,000 for their seat.

The flight of the VSS Unity over New Mexico has breathed life back into Virgin Galactic's space tourism programme after a period in which it had struggled to overcome engineering challenges.



Virgin Galactic SpaceshipTwo Launch. Image Virgin Galactic

Branson, who was in New Mexico to watch, said: "Everything worked like a dream. They're analysing the data but the initial feedback from the chief engineer has been incredibly positive and so it will not be very long now before I get my flight in and before we open it up to the many people who signed up to go to space with us."

**Pandemic Progress** continues unabated. The vaccine rollout forges ahead and we have now given more than 65 million doses of vaccine or 74.9% of the population have had their first dose and 48.9% of the population have had their second. At the end of May, Britain recorded zero deaths within 28 days of a positive coronavirus test for the first time since July last year. Reports of daily deaths are often lower at weekends and Mondays because less counting takes place while statisticians are not working. A total of 3,165 new cases were recorded in the latest figures, up from 2,493 a week ago so we are still not out of the woods yet. The total number of deaths remains at 127,782.

These numbers leave OIL (AKA The Prime Minister) with a problem. We are warned by several scientists that we are on the edge of a third wave of infections. In Scotland their OILette (AKA First Minister) claims that the protection offered by a single dose of existing vaccines "is not substantial" and so she is postponing lifting restrictions in Scotland. It should be note that uptake of vaccines is less than in England. Warnings come from a disparate collection of research scientists, professional bodies such as the Royal College of Nursing.

Despite these warnings, an amazing number of Members of Parliament are pressuring OIL to take a different approach in England. The former Conservative leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith urged the prime minister to defy the "organised push by a group of scientists to stop June 21". One wonders whether MPs are noticing the impact of the Indian variant in several constituencies in England. Currently OIL sees nothing in the numbers to cause him to postpone the lifting of restrictions.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

**Controversy** is never far from environmental projects and the latest to spread its wings concerns the planned re-introduction of sea eagles in eastern England. Regular readers may recall that six white tailed eagles (or Sea Eagles as they are also known) were released on the Isle of Wight in 2019 and have roamed the country. They seem

to be established but have yet to breed. Sea Eagles were last recorded in England 240 years ago at Culver Cliff on the Isle of Wight in 1780.



White tailed Eagle. Image Sergey Uryadnikov/Shutterstock

period, with the aim of establishing a small breeding population of six to 10 pairs in the region.

The licence grant has not been universally popular and several farming organisation, including a sheep farming group has said it is 'unsurprised' with Natural England's decision to grant a licence for the release of 60 sea eagles in Norfolk, despite farmers' concerns. The National Sheep Association (NSA) chief executive Phil Stocker said: "Natural England reportedly examined data from elsewhere in Europe ahead of this decision, but it is not clear that it took into consideration reports closer to home, i.e. Scotland." Your reporter is unaware of any claims from Scotland that sheep have gone inexplicably missing in Scotland. We might also hope that the introduction of these birds from Poland will herald a return to raptor productivity – we all know the effect Polish builders had on the British construction industry.

**More controversy** reigns but this time over smaller birds. A report in the Times cites a research project in Scotland claiming that the use of bird feeders is upsetting local ecosystems. Analysis of droppings of small birds shows an unequal distribution of food on offer at garden feeders. The impact of feeding by humans also shows nest box occupation up 25 per cent in areas where no human-provided food was present in birds' guts to about 75 per cent where it was. The cause of this inequality is apparently the privileged behaviour of Blue and Great Tits.

The serious side to the Manchester Metropolitan University study, led by **Dr Jack Shutt**, is that blue tit numbers are increasing but "the birds the blue tits are competing with, they're not doing as well" according to Dr Shutt. Woodland birds such as the lesser spotted woodpecker, which competes with blue tits for nest sites and food. Its numbers have fallen 73 per cent in 25 years. Similarly, the pied flycatcher numbers have fallen by about 38 per cent. Birds that are bullied by blue tits when they approach feeders have also fallen, including the willow tit, down 87 per cent, and the marsh tit, down 53 per cent. We await the formation of the Anti-Blue Tit Bullying Society to restore fair play at Britain's bird feeders!

**Splattered bugs** are contributing to efforts to reverse declining numbers of flying insects. These little beasts are highly significant to the economy as much of British agriculture needs pollinators for their crops to germinate. Now scientists are appealing to the public to download a new "splatometer" app that counts bugs squashed on cars

for a project to determine the numbers of small insects. This app, created by a group of wildlife trusts and the charity Buglife, will act as a census for creatures near the bottom of the food chain.

The app, designed by the Kent, Gwent, Essex, and Somerset wildlife trusts, requires users to clean their car number plate before a drive. On reaching their destination, they count the bugs squashed on a section of the plate by placing a special grid, the splatometer, against it. Drivers then upload a picture of the splatometer with details of location and the results become part of a nationwide survey. Citizen Science projects rule! This is an important project as insect decline has major implications world-wide, as well reported in the Times (see their 29 May leader and news item at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/drivers-asked-to-download-splatter-app-to-help-monitor-insect-numbers-8ppgsqgdz>).

Actually, it is projects that rule, but lets hear it for others who contribute. Let us all hope that the world sorts out the pandemic – and quickly. We need all the help we can get and every bit of ecological help is especially important.

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## 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](mailto:miles.shepherd@msp-ltd.co.uk).