

Project Management is critical to Sustainability

APM's Sustainability Conference Oct 2023¹

By Dr. Hugo Minney

Context

Project managers are crucial to the delivery of sustainability in all its forms – environmental, social and community; and good governance for the future of the organisation and the changes brought about by its projects.

For change work, including projects, programmes, portfolios and other work, the change can be done in a sustainable way, or lead to a sustainable result – a change in people's behaviours or processes that is more favourable to the environment, the community and/or the future. Or both.

Since this sustainability is a consequence of change, it is appropriate that [APM's Benefits & Value](#) and [APM's Governance](#) SIGs (Specific Interest Groups) alongside [PMI UK's Sustainability Community of Action](#), jointly, organised a conference in London UK on sustainability.

Speakers and content

[Organized around three major themes](#), the event highlighted the contributions of both the audience and speakers, with a bias towards the UK. Many of the largest projects in UK have been driven by, and funded by, government. However, there are thousands of smaller projects being delivered by for-profit organisations, which are tailored (often by the project manager) to be run in a sustainable way and to deliver sustainable outcomes.

The three themes focused down through the day from: the broad context of sustainability for leaders; through examples from major construction projects with their own legacy and sustainability teams; to measurement, since what gets measured, gets done (this is not just a motto, it really matters).

Theme 1: Sustainability Issues for Leaders, introduced by Jon Loveday (Infrastructure and Projects Authority); with discussions led by Roger Garrini and Katherine Ingham (governance), Hugo Minney (benefits and value applications) and Ian Cribbes (leadership and culture).

Theme 2: Legacy from major construction projects, introduced by Jo Dobson (for the Olympics 2012 legacy team); with discussions led by Samantha Freelove (Tideway rewilding), Emily Robinson (Sport London and encouraging sport for people with disabilities), and Alex Budzier

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(the challenge of the Carbon footprint and cost of building new vs the cost of heating/ cooling/ fuelling old).

Theme 3: Measuring the improvements in environmental, social and governance as a result of change projects, introduced by Jonathan Williams (Environment Agency UN SDGs team); with discussions led by Jonathan (EA and the UN SDGs applied to UK), Esther Gordon Smith (how to apply sustainability metrics to road building) and Lauren Tuckerman (what the research shows).

Speakers formed a panel at the end to answer questions and tease out discussion.

Key lessons from the speakers and audience

- **Project Managers make a difference:** The overarching lesson from the conference is that project managers have a huge part to play. A motivated project leadership team can make an ordinary project both deliver sustainable outcomes, and engage the supply chain in sustainable practices which experience they will take with them to other projects. An indifferent project leadership team can change the focus of the project to the delivery of concrete walls or computer equipment linked together with cables, meeting the minimum viable product but failing to deliver benefits or sustainability.
- **The complexity and interplay of the environment is beautiful and fascinating:** if you do get involved with rewilding or migration tunnels, the opportunities for a project manager to meet interesting naturalists, and to watch wildlife (both animal and plant) do its thing, are a delight that will enrich your soul. An improvement that helps one species also affects many others, and even toads and snails can be loveable.
- **ESG responds quickly:** wildlife repopulates once the conditions are right; communities find their heart and vandalism and crime reduce; the culture within an organisation responds to the example set by good leadership – surprisingly fast. A project manager can see effects quickly, and it's worth putting metrics in place to measure the improvements because you will see the changes, certainly lead metrics in place which can be reported during delivery of your change. By the same token, we aren't doing this for our children and grandchildren – climate change is with us now with extreme weather and some parts of the world becoming uninhabitable, forcing migration. Community disintegration is with us now and affects us as well as our friends and families. Poor governance destroys value in the companies that are the wealth in our pension pots and other investments. It is urgent.
- **Each individual project makes a difference:** bigger projects do make a bigger difference – the Olympics laid down a legacy for engaging young people with sport across the nations, and Tideway's rewilding project affected migratory species. However, there's a world in a puddle (if it isn't polluted with chemicals) and small projects such as wildlife

corridors between small green areas make a massive difference to the many small animals that are prey to bigger animals that are symbolic of environmental regeneration.

Next Steps

Delegates were encouraged to network, and conversations continue on the air waves after people have gone our separate ways. The conference was introduced by a series of blogs ([Building for legacy — the London 2012 Olympic Park](#); [Why putting ESG objectives first is the obvious, but not instinctive, thing to do](#); [New approaches to delivering projects for sustainability: applying benefits and governance](#)), and there have been [a few blogs to summarise the results, including a link to some of the resources](#) – and of course PMI UK's Sustainability Community of Action continues to run webinars and events and to publish content.

In APM, we're collecting interest from members about a Sustainability Interest Network, which will probably be held jointly with PMI UK's Sustainability Community of Action, so please do get in touch.

Conclusion

Project Management is crucial to delivering on Sustainability, on each of the streams of Environment, Social and Governance. A motivated project leadership team, or even an individual, can steer a project to deliver more rewarding and sustainable outcomes for the project, society, and themselves, and encourage suppliers and contractors to think sustainably and change their future practice. But the same is true of an unmotivated project leadership team – they can undo good intentions very quickly.

We can apply the principles to each of us, ourselves. **What are we doing about our own environmental impact?** Are we leading by example? Are we enjoying - even fascinated by - the environment we live in? **On the social front**, are we networking with others who can reinforce our understanding of sustainability, and how to steer projects and other change in the direction of sustainability? And on the **governance** front, are we maintaining our personal CPD, both learning and preparing materials for others? And are we applying this learning?

NOTES:

This document is original material written by Dr Hugo Minney, is being submitted to PM World Journal on 30 Nov. 23 and has not been submitted anywhere else. There are no conflicts of interest. This work was not funded by any institution. There were no paying sponsors for the conference. Attendees paid a conference fee to attend. The conference did not make a profit. (APM refunded expenses for travel and accommodation, and APM bore the costs of the conference including expenses for speakers and the conference room, and collected/retained the conference fee from delegates).

About the Author



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Dr. Hugo Minney is a Fellow of APM (Association for Project Management), a Member of PMI and PMI UK, Co-Chair of APM's Benefits and Value SIG and committee member of PMI UK's Sustainability Community of Action (none of which are paid). Minney was chair and MC of the conference described above and opened the conference, introduced speakers, closed the conference, and is authorised to describe the content.

Minney set out to become a farmer, working on farms throughout his youth and teens and studying agriculture at Oxford. In the end he was defeated by the capital requirements and the sheer bureaucracy, but by that point he'd led a team in ICI's Milkchase competition to finish in the top quarter with a radical low-input low-output solution (the computer programme was biased for high input because the inputs would come from ICI!). Minney has worked in project management, and in particular benefits management, motivating team members by reporting what they are achieving together and changing the community and culture to want to achieve – together. At present he's more involved on the governance side, accredited as a Social Value practitioner and Chartered Project Professional, and reviewing the balance of projects and contribution to objectives and benefits across portfolios.

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