

UK Project Management Round Up



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INTRODUCTION

For those of us in the Northern Hemisphere, Spring has sprung, or so my gnomes report from as far afield as USA, Greece and China. There is a dearth of reporting from the more northerly countries such as northern Norway and more locally, northern Czech Republic from whence I have been following the World Biathlon Championships, so, like some project reports (see below) we assume it is late.

That said, there is good news to report and some old news has resurfaced. We also cover developments in some major infrastructure projects including HS2 and Stonehenge so there is a lot to cover.

GOOD NEWS

Dementia Research. The National Health Service (NHS) released forecasts related to Alzheimer's Disease with the worrying news that indicated large numbers of patients could miss out on new two breakthrough drugs because they cannot diagnose the disease early enough. Rolling out the new drugs is predicted to cost between £500 million and £1 billion per year, with the drugs delivered to patients at clinics via fortnightly or monthly intravenous drips.



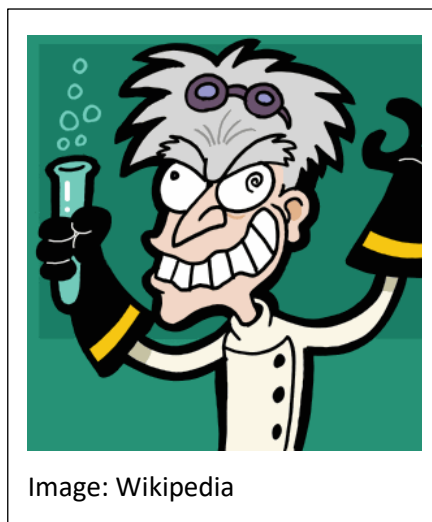
Image: Pixabay

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It is therefore excellent news that a research project has found that blood tests that analyse protein levels in blood can predict dementia up to 15 years before symptoms become evident. Researchers have identified a set of biological markers which are present more than a decade before the clinical onset of dementia. In the project, blood samples taken from 52,000 healthy adults, which had been taken as part of the UK Biobank study and frozen for 10-15 years were analysed using AI. In the intervening time between freezing and analysis, 1,417 of the participants were diagnosed with dementia.

The implications of this breakthrough are far reaching as current diagnosis depends on highly invasive and costly testing. The new tests simply rely on routing blood sampling and bring closer the possibility of routine testing for specific age groups. This would enable long term planning to take place to meet the demands of an aging population more efficiently than at present. Such diagnosis would also enable the new drugs coming onto the market to be administered in time to be effective, thus reducing overall costs.

Project Funding. This is always good news for PMs and one that has had an unexpected boost from the Government which wants to improve on UK's record on innovation. It has just funded the Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA) to the tune of £800 Million to focus on projects with the potential to produce transformative technological change, or a paradigm shift in an area of science. The Agency is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. Plans to form the Agency were first reported in 2021 when the Press trumpeted it as legally entitled to invest in projects that are likely to fail and which will be exempted from freedom of information laws. This played up the stereotypical image of the unfettered mad scientist caricatured above. Another criticism levelled at the notion revolves around its proposer, reputed to be **Dominic Cummings**, he of Covid Rules Ignorance under OIL (Our Illustrious Leader – AKA Boris Johnson).



The original announcement back in February 2021 promised initial funding of £800 million so it is interesting that this has been maintained given the dire economic situation the Nation faces. Recent press reports cite its Director, **Dr Ilan Gur**, as intending to back projects that lie “on the edge of the possible” — and that one of the first will look for ways to manage the weather responsibly. This is not as far fetched as it sounds as according to **Dr Mark Symes**, professor of electrochemistry and electrochemical technology at the University of Glasgow, “*We have people in the UK working on weather management technologies, in some cases, they have small working devices. They are waiting for someone to take them seriously.*” This immediately prompted the naysayers to announce concerns about unintended consequences. But the good news is that many innovative projects will be funded in the future.

BREXIT

I had hoped we had put this topic to bed but it seems it just won't go away. It will come as no surprise to canny Project Managers (PMs) that leaving a customs union will have an effect on exports. This was one of those tricky points that Prime Ministers (OIL to differentiate) and seemingly to some tech giants. We learned this month that Amazon believes that Brexit is hurting exports. Apparently, they have just noticed that overseas orders for British supplied goods have slowed as Johny Foreigner is concerned about additional red tape. They have not noticed any reduction in British desire for stuff from foreign parts! Not sure how this links to projects but thought you would like to know how one of the world's more astute firms keeps tables on its trade.

INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

This section might also be called the Bad News page, but I have decided that such a headline would cause Zoomers to panic so we can look at some areas of, shall we say, "concern" under the banner of infrastructure projects. First up is the rail infrastructure:

High Speed 2. Mixed News here as, first of all, Florence, the largest tunnelling machine ever used on a UK rail project, emerged from its 10-mile journey under the Chiltern hills. The journey started at Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire in May 2021 and completed its journey on 27 February. A second, identical machine is expected to achieve its breakthrough in the coming weeks.



Image: HS2

Florence is no light weight and comes in at around 2000 tonnes and a diameter of 34 feet. The technical achievement is impressive as Florence excavated one of two tunnels at a depth of up to 80m (262ft). The tunnel was lined with 56,000 pre-cast concrete segments as the machine moved at an average speed of 16m (52ft) a day.

The not so good tunnelling news is that boring is thought to have caused sinkholes to appear in a field. Two holes were discovered on the outskirts of South Heath, near Great Missenden, Bucks. This brings the total of sinkholes attributed to HS2 up to four in the last nine months. The Environment Agency said it was investigating whether any pollution had been caused.

Other news, of a rather less alarming kind is that £4.7 Billion left over from the cancelled Phase 2a is being reallocated to towns and cities in the Midlands and North

of England. The cash is headed for local transport funds with councils left to decide how to spend it. Needless to say, other political parties criticised the plan but offered no sensible alternatives.

Airports. My transport gnomes report two items of news. First, Manchester Airport Group has had to scale back to more than double in size to become a Heathrow of the north. New plans reveal a target of 50 million passengers a year by 2040, down from the planned 60 million, blaming the government decision to scrap the HS2 Phase 2 extension. Part of the fallout of the cancellation is the loss of the link between Manchester and Birmingham Airports. MAG is now backing efforts by the mayors of Manchester and Birmingham to revive plans for the HS2 line between the cities backed by private money.

Long term readers may recall the kerfuffle caused by plans for a third runway at Heathrow. My Heathrow gnome tells me this has been quietly shelved despite the years of controversy and alarm over squeezing a runway into an already crowded space. Rumour has it that the Third Runway Team is being disbanded as part of a new strategy being worked up by incoming Chief Executive **Thomas Woldbye** under the strap line “better not bigger”. This plan envisages increasing the throughput to a mind boggling 96 million passengers. If I recall, the record was set in 2019 when 80.9 million passengers were herded through the gates. This was considered a maximum that was unlikely to be exceeded without more landing spaces and accompanying terminal buildings. How times change!

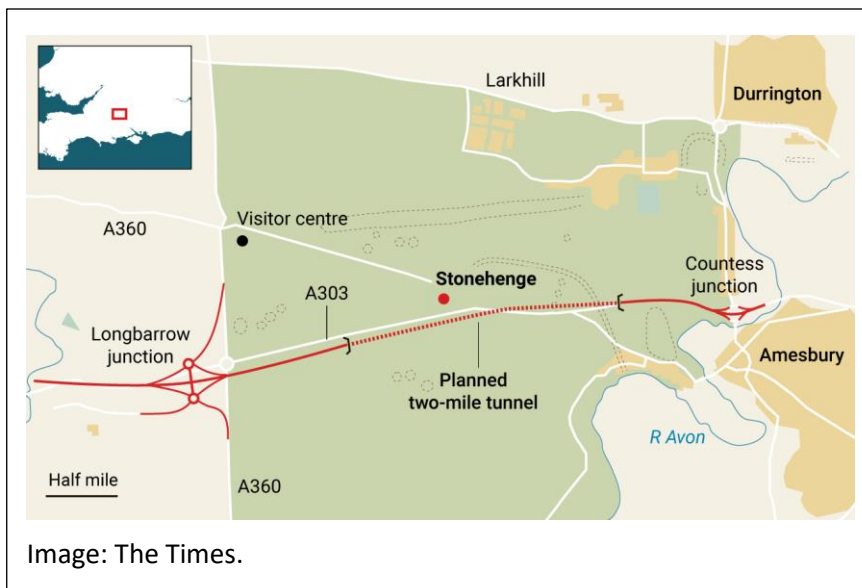
Stonehenge. Just as we say farewell to one controversial and highly expensive project, another turns up. This isn't exactly new as it has been “debated” over the years with dire forecasts of impact on the natural environment, damage to unknown



Image: K Mitch Hodge

archaeological information and religious worship so we can expect this to be the next big cause celebre.

The site is well-known, and the image above gives a good idea of its size. What it does not show is the local road less than 200 metres from the southern edge of the stones, nor the regular traffic jams on this stretch of road. The project itself is relatively simple in concept: it proposes a 2-mile tunnel to remove traffic from the immediate area, thus reducing pollution, improving traffic flow and providing some relief for local residents.



Protesters have had their legal challenge rejected at the High Court in February and the way is now clear for construction to begin.

The timeline leading up to the Court decision goes back many years and involves a complex range of stakeholders, including UNESCO

which had threatened to remove the world heritage status of the site and as recently as September 2023 said the government should make amendments to the plan for a tunnel near Stonehenge or “not proceed”. This is clearly not an empty threat as a report in The Times stated “In 2021 Liverpool lost its status after concerns over the redevelopment of its waterfront. It was only the third site in almost 50 years to lose the title, which brings with it UN funding”.

The Court decision was welcomed by the Highways Agency’s National Projects Director, **David Bullock**, who stated ““We welcome the High Court’s decision and wait for conclusion of the legal proceedings. It is a positive step forward and would mean that at long last we can progress solving the issues of the A303 near Stonehenge”.

This was supported by the Chief Executive of Historic England, **Duncan Wilson**, who said: “After years of uncertainty, we are very pleased that the court has upheld the secretary of state’s decision, bringing us all one step closer to realising the ambitions of the A303 Stonehenge improvement scheme”.

The project has already cost the Government over £120 million and all they have to show for this is a Court rejection of protests. The work is estimated to come in £2.5 Billion. Knowing the UK protest industry, this is likely to run and run.

ENERGY PROJECTS

This is another sector with mixed news so we have a **Trigger Warning** for Zoomers: skim the section on wind farms and rejoin the rest of the readers on Energy Security. The first section on wind farms is not really new, but is all part of the confusing situation facing energy planners.

Wind Farms. This area has been reported several times in the past year so I will not go over the problems facing the sector yet again. Suffice it to say that the changing world economic situation continues to impact firms operating in this area. One of the outcomes is that Orsted, the world's biggest offshore wind developer, continues to hit financial choppy waters.

Orsted operates the largest wind farm development in the world, the Dogger Bank Wind Farm, a three-phase project located off the northeast coast of England. According to the project website, each phase will have an installed generation capacity of 1.2GW and represents a multi-billion pound investment. Combined, they will have an installed capacity of 3.6GW and will be capable of powering up to 6 million homes annually. Project completion is scheduled for 2026 but has had several project delays.

Financial issues have caused Orsted to cancel its dividend for this year and to announce a reduction in activity. Press reports indicate that it will exit the offshore wind markets in Norway, Spain and Portugal and will minimise its focus on Japan. The group scrapped two projects in the United States, blaming high inflation and supply chain constraints, which forced it to write off £4.6 billion in impairments. Hopefully the level of investment in the Dogger Bank project and others in the North Sea will encourage the firm to complete the projects. Future investment and new project development remain troublesome.

Energy Planning. My eye was caught by a small report on this topic because it laid the blame for our poor energy security at the feet of projects that had gone badly. Specifically, we are not building enough power plants to meet growing demand. Overruns at Hinkley C and the many decommissioning projects all contribute to a worrying situation as plants come to the end of their life over the next few years. The gap between secure power production and expected demand is forecast to peak in 2028. Insecure provision in the form of wind and solar will be able to take up some of the gap but recent research indicates a crunch point in 2028 of 5 GW. The simple answer is to make sure existing projects go according to plan and that new technologies such as Small Nuclear Reactors come online in time to plug the gap.

New Technology Projects. New money has been provisionally agreed that should enable more pumped storage hydroelectric projects to go ahead. One such project, the £1.5 billion scheme from SSE has started in the Scottish Highlands. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero plans to develop a "cap and floor" pricing mechanism that would advance the Coire Glas storage project (see Dec 23 report for details of this spectacular project) and could unlock further pumped storage power stations.

CLOSING REMARKS

I've run out of space this month so will hold over some further news on the Infrastructure Projects Authority (IPA) pipeline, a Giga factory in Somerset and decommissioning the Culham Fusion Reactor. There should also be news of wildlife projects to whet the appetite, so I hope to see you, so to speak, next month!

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 more than 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 past Chair of the ISO committee developing new international standards for Project Management and for Program/Portfolio Management. He is recently stepped down as 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.