

Implementing BS202002: Benefits management on portfolios, programmes and projects¹

The role of Project Managers in driving sustainability across industries²

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In this series expanding on the British standard BS 202002:2023 (Benefits Management for Portfolios, Programmes and Projects) [1], we've covered benefits management across the portfolio, and the key stages of benefits management in programmes, projects and other related work.

As we face climate and environmental crisis after crisis, and breakdowns in community cohesion and mental health, sustainability has to be front and centre in most of our major projects, and the benefits of sustainability need to be quantified and justified.

The project leadership – the project manager, benefits manager and sponsor – has a big part to play. Project leadership can adjust the objectives so they take into account sustainability, adjust outcomes (changes) so they deliver sustainability, and adjust activities so they not only are sustainable of themselves, but also that they change the way workers and suppliers work towards more sustainable practices.

In all of this, the golden thread is governance. Governance ensures that policies are followed, and policies that include sustainable outcomes in developing the benefits, and sustainable processes in developing the delivery, will ensure sustainable projects.

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The importance of the project manager

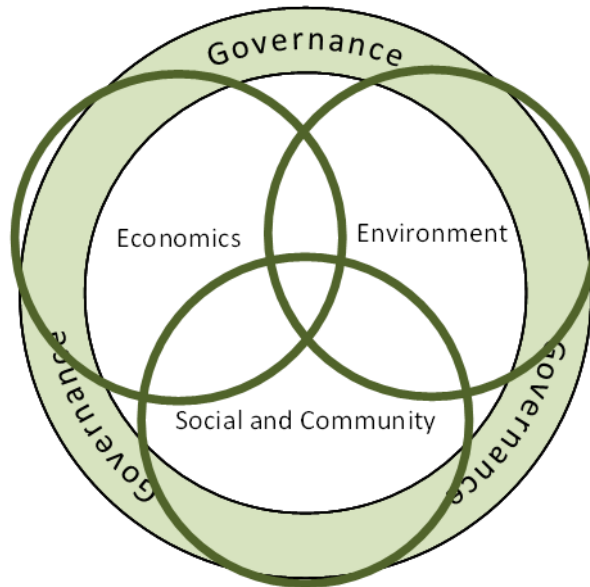


Figure 1 The three pillars of sustainability and the importance of governance

Project managers in the project leadership team play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between the initial vision of a project in its successful completion. Their importance is magnified in projects aiming at sustainability goals, where they must balance technical requirements, stakeholder expectations, and environmental impacts. These professionals not only manage timelines and budgets but are also responsible for integrating sustainable practices into core project activities, and understanding the use case and opportunities to improve on that too. As the primary decision-makers and coordinators, project managers are in a unique position to drive sustainability initiatives across various industries [2].

Their responsibilities include:

- Aligning project goals with organizational sustainability objectives
- Incorporating sustainability considerations into project scope, timelines, and budgets
- Engaging stakeholders and promoting sustainability awareness within project teams
- Identifying and mitigating potential environmental and social risks associated with projects

- Monitoring and reporting on sustainability performance throughout the project lifecycle

Research has shown that project managers with a strong understanding of sustainability principles and practices are more likely to deliver projects that balance economic, environmental, and social factors [3]. By prioritizing sustainability, project managers can contribute to the long-term success of their organizations while positively impacting communities and the environment.

What is sustainability anyway?

Sustainability is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the responsible management of economic, environmental, and social resources to ensure the well-being of current and future generations [4]. In the context of project management, sustainability involves:

- **Economic sustainability:** Ensuring projects deliver long-term financial benefits and contribute to the economic growth of organizations and communities.
- **Environmental sustainability:** Minimizing the negative environmental impact of projects and of the deliverables from projects, such as reducing carbon emissions, conserving natural resources, and promoting energy efficiency.
- **Social sustainability:** Addressing the social implications of projects, both during project delivery (community engagement, stakeholder participation, and the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion) and as a result of projects (stronger communities, empowered people, hope).
- **Governance:** complying with, and even anticipating, regulations; policies and procedures that change the ways that organisations and people think and plan.

Sustainable project management requires a holistic approach that considers the interconnectedness of these pillars (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). By integrating sustainability principles into project decision-making and processes, organizations can create value for all, whilst mitigating risks and ensuring the long-term viability of their projects[2].

However the picture is a little more nuanced[5], and projects have a habit of delivering unexpected consequences.

Environmental – measuring and financial equivalents

When considering environmental sustainability in project management, it's important to distinguish between two key aspects:

- 1) sustainable practices implemented during the project delivery process, and
- 2) delivering project outcomes that promote sustainable use.

While the former focuses on minimizing the environmental impact of project activities, the latter ensures that the end product or service contributes to long-term environmental sustainability[6].

Tools like life cycle assessments (LCA) and environmental impact assessments (EIA) can help project managers quantify the environmental footprint of their projects [7-9], and there are various KPIs that could be tracked both during project delivery to assess sustainable practices, and when planning and afterwards, to determine the long term effects:

- Greenhouse gas emissions
- Energy consumption
- Water usage
- Waste generation and recycling rates
- Soil structure and damage
- Biodiversity and habitat suitability

Translating environmental sustainability into financial terms can help project managers build a stronger business case for green initiatives[10]. For example, in the construction industry, investing in energy-efficient buildings can lead to significant long-term savings in operating costs, offsetting the initial construction impact[11]. Where direct financial benefits are not available, project managers should identify trustworthy financial equivalent values and communicate these as the return on investment, to secure support for sustainable practices.

Social and community - measuring, reporting and financial equivalent

Similar to environmental sustainability, social sustainability in project management involves two distinct aspects:

- 1) incorporating social considerations during the project delivery process, and
- 2) delivering project outcomes that promote long-term social sustainability.

Social sustainability in project management involves assessing and managing the impact of projects on communities and stakeholders. Project managers should engage with local communities through representative groups and advocates, understand their needs and concerns, and work to create positive social outcomes both through the activities of project delivery, and as outcomes from the projects[12]. Some key social sustainability metrics include:

- Job creation and local employment
- Community engagement and satisfaction
- Health and safety performance

- Diversity and inclusion metrics

Project managers can use social impact assessments (SIA) to measure and report on the social sustainability of their projects[13]. These assessments help identify potential social risks and opportunities, allowing project managers to develop strategies to mitigate negative impacts and enhance positive ones.

Investing in social sustainability can also yield financial benefits for organizations. For example, in the healthcare sector, implementing new pathways of care that prioritize patient-centred approaches can lead to improved health outcomes, reduced readmission rates, and lower long-term healthcare costs[14]. By demonstrating the financial value of social sustainability, project managers can secure the necessary resources and support to drive positive change.

Governance relating to sustainability in project management

Effective governance is essential for integrating sustainability into project management practices. Organizations should establish clear policies, guidelines, and accountability measures to ensure that sustainability considerations are embedded throughout the project lifecycle (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). Some key governance aspects include:

- Developing a sustainability strategy aligned with organizational goals and values
- Assigning roles and responsibilities for sustainability within project teams
- Establishing sustainability criteria in project selection and prioritization processes
- Implementing sustainability reporting and disclosure practices
- Engaging with external stakeholders, such as regulators, investors, and industry bodies, to stay informed about sustainability best practices and requirements



Figure 2 Project lifecycle with sustainability considerations flowchart

Project managers should work closely with their organization's leadership and sustainability experts to ensure that governance structures support the effective

implementation of sustainability practices[2]. By establishing strong governance frameworks, organizations can create a culture of sustainability that permeates all aspects of project management.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ESG alignment

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global framework for addressing the world's most pressing environmental, social, and economic challenges. The 17 SDGs (see **Error! Reference source not found.**), adopted by UN member states in 2015, set ambitious targets to be achieved by 2030[15]. Project managers can use the SDGs as a guide to align their projects with global sustainability priorities and contribute to the achievement of these goals.



Figure 3 the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

The following table shows how the 17 SDGs align with the three key aspects of ESG:

Sustainable Development Goal	Environment	Social	Governance
1. No Poverty		✓	
2. Zero Hunger	✓	✓	
3. Good Health and Well-being		✓	
4. Quality Education		✓	
5. Gender Equality		✓	✓
6. Clean Water and Sanitation	✓	✓	
7. Affordable and Clean Energy	✓		
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth		✓	✓

9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	✓	✓	✓
10. Reduced Inequalities		✓	✓
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities	✓	✓	✓
12. Responsible Consumption and Production	✓		✓
13. Climate Action	✓		✓
14. Life Below Water	✓		
15. Life on Land	✓		
16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions		✓	✓
17. Partnerships for the Goals			✓

By understanding how the SDGs relate to ESG factors, project managers can more effectively integrate sustainability into their projects and contribute to the global effort to create a more sustainable future.

Conclusion

Integrating sustainability into project management is no longer optional; it is a strategic imperative for organizations seeking to create long-term value and contribute to a more sustainable world. Project managers play a crucial role in driving sustainability by incorporating environmental, social, and governance considerations into project planning, execution, and monitoring processes.

By measuring and reporting on sustainability performance, translating sustainability impacts into financial terms, and establishing strong governance frameworks, project managers can build a compelling case for sustainable practices and secure the necessary support from stakeholders. Furthermore, aligning projects with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals can help organizations contribute to global sustainability efforts and demonstrate their commitment to responsible business practices.

As the world continues to face complex sustainability challenges, project managers have a unique opportunity to lead the way in creating a more sustainable future. By embracing sustainable project management practices, they can deliver projects that not only meet the needs of their organizations but also create positive, long-lasting impacts for communities and the environment.

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Minney set out to become a farmer, but was defeated by bureaucracy. He sold high ticket computer systems and specialist software for workforce planning; joined the National Health Service for 18 years (and as a Chief Executive for the last 7 of these), and is now a project management consultant with a sideline chairing a charity restoring the sense of community for young people.

Minney works 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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