Mission possible: improving the connectedness of major projects

Highlights

Highlights from the Major Projects Association 2025 Annual Conference held on 6th-7th October 2025

MAJOR PROJECTS ASSOCIATION

In an era of profound public policy reform, where the Government's strategic priorities are articulated through missions – not departments – how can major projects step up to deliver greater value? This year's Major Projects Association Annual Conference explored how we join up the initiation and delivery of major projects with the UK Government's evolving missions agenda, as laid out in the Prime Minister's **Plan for Change.**

Mission-based government promises to tackle society's grand challenges – clean energy, economic growth, health and net zero – through cross-sector, outcome-focused collaboration.

It offers a chance for major projects to contribute in ways that go beyond traditional delivery models and metrics. But to do so effectively, we must rethink how we plan, govern and manage major projects and programmes.

This conference explored what the shift from transactional to portfolio-based project thinking means in practice. From reforms to the Green Book with the introduction of place-based business cases, to the formation of Mission Boards and the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA), the major projects landscape is being reshaped to enable interconnected, system-wide thinking.

How should project sponsors, clients, contractors, advisers, investors and regulators respond? What capabilities will we need? Are we ready for what Nirmal Kotecha, Chair of the Major Projects Association, called the 'omniproject'?

> ***'If we truly want mission-led outcomes for government, we must lead and deliver in a different way. Hence, a system of systems approach in HMRC.'***

Oliver Fisher, Chief Investment Officer, HMRC

Identifying the key factors for joined up projects within an organisation so inherently complex as HMRC is challenging, but Oliver Fisher of HMRC believed it can be boiled down to three things: the ability to drive strategy, the ability to execute well, and the ability to lead through that culture. HMRC are finding they need to invest in common core capabilities to foster collaboration and shared value, and build a systems mindset.

What does the current political landscape mean for major projects?

Delegates were fortunate to hear directly from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Rt Hon James Murray MP, on how the Government's mission-based approach will impact the delivery of major projects and the changes that have been made to ensure their delivery.

It was a powerful call to action that of the £725 billion worth of projects programmed to be delivered within the next decade, an estimated 80% of that would be managed by the major projects community represented by those in the room.

NISTA is critical to bringing everyone together to deliver these ambitious programmes. Their focus will be removing the barriers to progress and helping to ensure the right priorities are articulated. A strong place-based approach and active spatial planning will be facilitated. A new internal spatial planning tool for NISTA's use is also in the pipeline.

The Government has also announced the establishment of 14 new technical centres of excellence to help provide the skills we need for the future, along with the investment in data centres and AI that will be required to keep the UK at the forefront of technological development.

Finally, the Chief Secretary emphasised the importance of the changes to the planning framework via the **Planning and Infrastructure Bill** and the fast-tracking of some planning decisions to unlock key projects and stimulate growth.

It was evident during the keynote speech and the subsequent Q&A session that growth does indeed trump all other objectives. There was a strong call for us to 'talk up' the capacity and capabilities of the UK as a great place to invest and do business. A large proportion of future funding needs to come from the private sector. The Government are still open to a range of public and private sector partnership approaches, and state that the lessons of previous PFI agreements have been learnt so that the right funding vehicles can be structured which provide both value for money and an attractive investment opportunity.

Perhaps the most significant takeaway from the session was the very presence of the Chief Secretary of Treasury at the conference. This reinforced the fact that an open communication channel is welcomed and that any challenge the Association brought to the table would be taken seriously.

'I know, looking around this room, that all of you are the engine of prosperity, no pressure there, but your critical role is to work with us in government to make sure that we know what barriers you need to be removed to enable you to get on with the work that you're focused on.'

Rt Hon James Murray MP, Chief Secretary to the Treasury

What do we mean by connectedness and how do we make it happen?

Listening to the ambitions of the Government's mission-mased approach, a systems-based approach and greater connectivity at all stages of project development and delivery are essential. But what do we mean by 'interconnectedness' and why is it so hard to achieve?

Professors Jeni Giambona and Nicholas Dacre of University of Southampton Business School unpacked the barriers we have to understand and remove before we can achieve a more connected approach.

It should be no surprise that it is hard to create connectedness in a project sector where we create stand-alone temporary organisations in the form of partnerships, alliances and joint ventures with a mix of different permanent organisations to deliver highly complex and large-scale infrastructure projects. This approach means there is a temporal disconnect between past, present and future decisions. Organisations form, dissolve and reform. People move on and up.

'Sometimes we do not apply lessons learned because we experience "uniqueness bias", but also because we don't manage to gather and tease out the huge amount of knowledge that there is in these temporary organisations.'

Professor Jeni Giambona, Professor of Systems Thinking, University of Southampton Business School

Giambona and Dacre identified three key structural barriers:

- **The Knowledge Asymmetry Paradox:** Whilst clients bear responsibility for project outcomes, they often lack the experiential knowledge of their supply chain partners.
- **Organisational Amnesia:** Knowledge erosion is exacerbated not only by workforce attrition but evolving regulatory landscapes.
- **The Mechanistic Control Trap:** Traditional governance models struggle to deal with dynamic and uncertain conditions.

To tackle these barriers, Giambona and Dacre proposed their **Major Projects Clienting Framework**. The framework helps client organisations transition from procuring outputs to orchestrating outcomes through six core dimensions.

'Effective clienting requires a systems approach and a framework that moves clients from a culture of Mission Control to Mission Orchestration.'

Dr Nicholas Dacre, Associate Professor of Project Management, University of Southampton Business School

Removing the barriers to a systems thinking approach

It would appear to be a widely-accepted viewpoint that the major projects sector should be taking a systems-thinking approach to delivering portfolios of projects that are better connected in place, space and shared outcomes.

As Dr Ivan Lucic of Jacobs reminded us, a systems-based approach is far from new but has not emerged as the default despite its many benefits.

To create a movement for change the **Built Environment Connective** has been formed. Its introductory paper states, 'It is time we saw the built environment differently – not as a series of construction projects but as a system of systems with explicit purpose of delivering the services that enable people and nature to flourish together for generations'.

The Connective's systems approach is being applied to the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor, providing an opportunity for this exemplar project to demonstrate the approach in action.

The call to action is for individuals and companies to join the initiative and connect with them via their website and LinkedIn to be part of a positive change for the future.

Why is the widespread use of a systems approach still not happening? It appears a systems-thinking approach has become intangible rather than a clearly understood and widely-used concept. It is time to challenge ourselves to see if we really understand its power and principles.

'We, the systems thinking community, are talking a language we don't often understand even between ourselves. There is no point being clever if no one understands it. We have to change; we have to speak plain English and focus on real benefits of systems thinking as opposed to the academic beauty of it.'

Dr Ivan Lucic, Senior Director of Integrated Systems, Jacobs

Connectedness in practice – projects leading the way

The Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor is one of the country's key strategic projects and already leveraging the power of a systems-thinking approach to deliver a portfolio of infrastructure to boost economic growth. Within this context, David Bray of **East West Rail** (EWR) in outlining the organsation's strategic aims showed how the narrative for a 'rail project' can be so much more.

EWR's strategic objectives:

- **Unlocking growth** for the region and the whole of the UK.
- **Delivering inclusive, sustainable growth** for everyone.
- **Providing connectivity** to deliver access to jobs, housing, education, healthcare and leisure.

EWR are collaborating closely with Network Rail and the fledgling Great British Railway. Recently, the announcement of the Universal Studios Theme Park investment near Bedford has brought further complexity and a new stakeholder, but also further strengthens the case for the scheme and its benefits.

But there are others, too, who are using a more creative and connected approach to deliver value and outcomes. Isabelle Adams of the Great Grid Partnership gave a snapshot of the progress on the **Great Grid Upgrade** and its programmatic delivery approach. In simple terms, this means that no one supplier delivers a whole project. They all deliver smaller modules across multiple projects. This approach really drives suppliers to work together, uses their collective strengths to work smarter and balances workload across the supply chain.

Isabelle advised that time spent at the outset of the project, to align outcomes and values across all the partners involved, was absolutely critical.

'Whilst at times it felt like we were holding the teams back, we were in fact building a vision, a culture and a related set of behaviours that are ensuring we deliver successfully.'

Isabelle Adams, Enterprise Director, Great Grid Partnership

Clare Carlaw of the **Grand Union Canal Transfer** project explained how this fascinating project had succeeded in bringing together three partners (Severn Trent, Affinity Water and the Canal and River Trust). The project takes Severn Trent's wastewater from Birmingham, treats and recycles it before transferring it along the Grand Union Canal to meet the needs of Affinity Water customers in Luton.

'We are using 18th Century infrastructure for a 21st Century need.'

Clare Carlaw, Head of Engagement, Land & Consents, Grand Union Canal Transfer

All partners are equal partners although only two have budgets. Roles are not duplicated on the project team; they have a shared leadership and delivery team which means they have been able to develop a shared social value strategy; a strong project identity which helps communication with stakeholders; and a balanced risk approach where the risk sits with the most appropriate party.

There are of course challenges. The fact that the main route of the scheme is almost entirely in other water company areas and that it is ultimately Affinity Water customers who are footing the bill and thus should get most of the benefits forces a different mindset. Intergenerational fairness is also a major consideration as, although the scheme is securing water supplies for the future, it is being paid for at a time when there is a growing level of water poverty.

Despite the innovation and joined-up thinking demonstrated by this project, Clare still challenged us to consider even wider collaboration between the different water companies and with the third sector. She also encouraged people to find out more about other projects in the energy sector (Offshore Transmission Owners – OFTOs), Transport for London's **Silvertown Tunnel** and the **Welsh Government's Mutual Investment Model** as sources of creative, connected working.

Selvin Brown MBE of the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) introduced us to the challenges of designing and implementing government schemes for decarbonising UK homes. Working in a dynamic environment with regular 'goal post moving' to deal with, Selvin highlighted one area which all projects could benefit from; capturing and acting upon lessons learnt from previous projects. Mixed outcomes from earlier schemes meant that there was a great deal of feedback to take on board for the future. AI is now being used to rigorously interrogate feedback replies and project documents so that future schemes build on these lessons.

With fraud another major issue, DESNZ are working closely with HMRC and the Department for Work and Pensions to leverage data that can confirm eligibility and simplify project roll-out for homeowners and project teams. Proactive targeting of the most vulnerable in the system to alleviate fuel poverty is also possible once systems and data are shared and departments work in a less siloed manner.

The current programme is the **Warm Homes: Local Grant** which will provide £500 million of grants over three years (2025–28) for decarbonisation and energy efficiency home improvements.

Are we ready for the 'omniproject'?

It is encouraging to see a new level of drive and ambition from the top of Government to deliver mission-led projects that encourage a joined-up approach, which can in turn maximise the impact of these projects for society.

Karina Singh of NISTA summarised NISTA's priorities in this new era where their role is now much more around the system challenges in delivering major projects and removing barriers to success.

Priorities:

1. Emphasis on taxpayer value. How do we get the best out of the £725 billion?
2. Making place-based business cases a reality and bringing them forward.
3. Giving private investors the confidence to invest.

A number of things have already happened which will facilitate that, including:

1. An agreement to rewrite **the Green Book** in 2026 and include guidance on articulating benefits and outcomes.
2. **The Teal Book** – how to deliver projects – is already published.
3. A Benefits Management Guide published internally will be available more widely next year.
4. Revised **Infrastructure Pipeline** published to boost investor confidence.
5. Taken responsibility for spatial planning with new internal team and tool being developed.

> ***'We might not be able to deliver all of this straight away, but are determined to work with you, as connector and interlocutor, to solve the systems challenges of today and tomorrow.'***

Karina Singh, Director of Function, Insight and Profession, NISTA

So, are we as a sector ready for the omniproject? Dr Michèle Dix CBE, Non-Executive Director of the Major Projects Association, thought 'no'. Whilst our ambition and even our use of language has grown to encompass the 'omniproject' and to 'orchestrate the eco-system', Michelle asked, 'Who will be the omnipresence for the omniproject?'

We will need leaders willing to share, trust and connect, if we want to progress. Building systems thinking and collaborative working frameworks into the skill sets of leaders for the future will be more important than ever.

NISTA will have an important role and have taken on the responsibility for spatial planning, which is key to this place-based and mission-led approach, but as they themselves recognise, managing the strategic web of projects and stakeholders to have joined up conversations about the vision for the future will be a huge challenge.

What can we do?

Throughout the day, speakers and participants offered a range of practical calls to action for how we can collectively move forward:

- Keep the communication channel open for discussion with the Major Projects Association, NISTA, the Treasury and other relevant departments.
- Rethink how we govern and deliver in a mission-led world.
- Join the networks of experienced practitioners willing to share their challenges and solutions honestly.
- Educate ourselves and our teams on existing good practice and approaches such as systems thinking.

Points for further discussion

- If economic growth trumps all other government objectives, can 'no build' ever be an option even when it is better for the environment?
- What steps need to be taken to expand/rebuild our supply chain in key areas on which the infrastructure and industrial strategy are reliant to deliver growth?
- As we focus on connectedness in major projects, is there an opportunity for greater alignment and connectedness for regulators?

Chair

Nirmal Kotecha, Chair, Major Projects Association

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Participating organisations

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Arcadis (UK) Limited
Arup
AtkinsRéalis
AWE
BAE Systems
Balfour Beatty plc
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Binnies
BP Exploration Operating Company Ltd
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Centre for Digital Built Britain
CJ Associates
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