From connectedness to delivery: Making the ecosystem learn

Highlights

Highlights from the Major Projects Association 2026 Annual Conference held on 12-13 October 2026

MAJOR PROJECTS ASSOCIATION

The 2026 Annual Conference built on the ideas from the 2025 conference regarding the connectedness of our major projects.

At last year's conference we heard that the scale of the UK pipeline of infrastructure, defence, and service transformation programmes is necessitating a more integrated approach to portfolio management. However, despite the greater joined-up thinking, a challenging delivery gap remains.

This year's conference turned to the challenge of this delivery gap: why, despite decades of inquiries and reviews, do we continue to encounter the same issues? Drawing on the **2026 Lovegrove Review**, the **2012 National Audit Office report on the Assurance for Major Projects** and the **1994 Latham Report** on construction productivity, we examined the tendency to generate insightful lessons without embedding the learning that leads to change and improvement.

Academic literature distinguishes between two types of institutional learning: **learning as knowledge** (reports, lessons learned) and **learning as change** (different decisions, behaviours, outcomes).

How do we shift towards 'learning as change' so we can avoid repeatedly encountering the same unresolved issues and challenges?

If 2025 was about connecting projects, 2026 has been about delivery and making the ecosystem learn.

If anyone in the room required convincing that the delivery gap exists, the keynote address by Jonathan Simcock, author of *The Delivery Gap: Why Government Projects Really Fail and What Can Be Done About It*, was designed to challenge any complacency. Jonathan is a former Executive Director of the Major Projects Directorate at the former Office of Government Commerce.

His book includes seven case studies. As he talked us through the chapter titles, he gave us a clear sense of the problems he had identified:

- **Obfuscation and delusion:** how hubris, myopia, short-termism, self-protection, and fear prevent the true status of projects from coming to light.
- **Vacillation and paralysis:** how we struggle to make timely decisions so that when we finally do decide to invest, every project is in negative float territory.
- **Blind ambition:** how we let wishful thinking lead to beginning a huge endeavour without the first idea of how we're going to finish it.
- **Complexity:** coming up with delivery strategies which are so convoluted that they become functionally undeliverable.
- **The inverse square law:** how, from Whitehall, three steps away from where the actual hard work goes on, everything looks nine times easier than it actually is.
- **Naivety:** the assumption that somehow the contract has transferred all the risk into the supply chain.
- **Arrogance:** from leaders who are not open-minded enough to accept that they might not always be right.

> ***'If you've got a really complex project ahead of you, don't start it. First, simplify the hell out of it and then start it. Complexity is absolutely fine in projects as long as you don't care how long it's going to take and how much it's going to cost.'***

Jonathan Simcock, author of *The Delivery Gap: Why Government Projects Really Fail and What Can Be Done About It*

This theme of simplification ran through a number of Jonathan's recommendations, which our Chair, Nirmal Kotecha, picked up in his call to action.

Do we need less but higher-quality assurance?

Do we need to simplify the language we use to communicate with ministers?

Do we, as engineers and project professionals, enjoy complexity too much?

If we recognise Jonathan's diagnosis, how do we learn from legacy projects and turn that learning into changes in processes and behaviours? If we know why projects fail and what needs to change, how can we make the major projects ecosystem learn?

Preparing for success: knowing as practice

If increasingly sophisticated standards and project management systems have failed to deliver improved project performance, then it would appear, as Jonathan Simcock diagnosed, that we must look at behaviours and interactions of the people delivering projects. Dr. Simon Addyman of The Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, UCL, took us back to basics to explore how we as humans solve problems.

> ***'Through interaction the answer evolves. People find the way forward by responding to others. Knowing happens through doing, interacting and responding.'***

Dr. Simon Addyman, Associate Professor of Project Management, The Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, UCL

In practice, this means examining whether an organisation is creating the conditions in which people can collectively find their way forward. This could include opportunities to meet face to face or virtually, well-structured and respectful meetings, safe spaces where everyone can contribute, and sufficient time for high-quality discussions.

In summary:

- Better opportunities for dialogue inside the project structure
- Better and more open meetings and reviews
- Being more responsive and open to challenge from each other

'Failure to learn is a failure of governance. Is it time for a rethink?' was the challenge laid down by Kristian Barrett, Senior Audit Manager, Major Projects Insights Team, National Audit Office (NAO). The NAO's recent publication **Governance and decision-making on mega-projects** offers a number of useful recommendations.

As Kristian observed, 'I think we can all agree that timely and effective decision making, guided by a strong shared vision of success, is what we need to get the best outcome.' Yet projects are so often doomed to failure at the first hurdle by a failure of government to set out and communicate a clear vision and objectives. Commitments to cost and schedule are also made too early, without a full understanding of the project's challenges.

Changes welcomed by the NAO include:

- Use of scenario planning to help the project team get more comfortable with uncertainty.
- Acknowledgement that a project's structure and leader may need to change over time to address different phases of the project, and that this can be planned rather than becoming unplanned leadership churn.
- Greater emphasis on a place-based portfolio of work.

Kristian also reflected on the fact that they have tended to focus on where projects face challenges, but are also interested in looking at 'what goes right' too, with a view to highlighting and sharing good practice. It was sobering to note that the Major Projects Association's own recent seminar entitled 'When we get it right – a spotlight on success' (**the highlights report from the event** makes interesting reading) was our most poorly attended event in recent years.

Does organisational culture trump all other success factors?

Roger Bailey, former Chief Technical Officer of Tideway, argued strongly that the creation of a strong company culture that prioritised openness and alignment with a clear vision paved the way for Tideway's successful delivery. However, in his list of critical success factors, he also reinforced the comments of others:

- Length of staff tenure giving a 'golden thread of understanding'
- De-risking the project at the early stages to lock in design
- Giving people time and space to think

Tideway was also lauded for its stakeholder engagement and belief in legacy, sustainability, and diversity.

To further support the learning legacy of the organisation, Tideway has created **12 specialist ICE Proceedings Papers** and a documentary called **Beneath your feet**.

Going from knowledge to knowing

The type of knowledge-sharing activities undertaken by Tideway are a rich source of knowledge for other clients and project delivery teams. Jo Lucas and Karen Elson of Co.Cre8 shared with us the other materials available via the Learning Legacies framework. Learning Legacies are credible knowledge resources that are peer-reviewed and curated for effective knowledge sharing via company websites, the Association's **Knowledge Repository** and other professional or special interest group forums. Alongside Learning Legacies, Learning from Experience resources have also been developed that allow live projects to contribute lessons learnt before project completion.

However, a key takeaway from this session was that knowledge is now relatively easy to access.

As Jo Lucas put it, 'it is less about people not knowing what good looks like, and more about how to adopt good practice: building the capability to adapt it ensures that it embeds into your project and your organisation'. We should identify the most important relationships between individuals and organisations and focus on unlocking their potential for sharing, learning and getting things 'done, done'.

When it comes to implementing lessons learnt, Porsche Consulting shared its journey to becoming a more effective learning organisation that could embed change. The automotive sector is well known for its process-driven approach and this 15-year programme at Porsche was structured around a simple process:

Starting with a **Vision** → progressing through the use of **Guidelines** → **Target Pictures** as visual aspirations → **Use Cases** for practical integration → **Data and Technology** deep dives to ensure full understanding.

This structured approach was applied not only to the overall project to deliver a SMART factory but also to every sub-project within the scheme.

> ***'Unashamedly copy others, imitate, learn from your competitors. Other sectors can do it, so what's holding you back to do it, especially on projects that are for the public good?'***

Dr. Franziska Vogel, Acting Partner, Porsche Consulting

Another structured initiative is the Get It Right Initiative (GIRI), which seeks to drive construction productivity by eliminating errors. GIRI has a series of **practical tools**, training courses, and workshops to support organisations seeking to improve construction productivity.

Figures from the **CITB GIRI Productivity Commission** put potential savings from avoiding errors at 9.83% of total project value.

'Press pause to avoid error' is one of the key messages from GIRI. This again emphasises the importance of time to think, good-quality preparation, and project initiation.

Getting outside the comfort zone

We are often told that getting outside our comfort zone is good for learning and professional development. It was noticeable that, as our speakers progressed from a peripheral mention of AI to a detailed presentation on the role it could play in accessing knowledge and supporting learning, there was far from a consensus in the room on its role and value.

Andy Murray of the Major Projects Association and Martin Paver of Projecting Success explored the power of AI to help us create bodies of knowledge and tools to access case studies, explore scenarios, and answer 'what went wrong'. Martin demonstrated how knowledge graphs and AI agents could embed learning into project delivery, arguing that 'everything needs to go through a factory' to ensure AI solutions are developed consistently and reliably.

> ***'At the moment every AI project is being run differently, so we need to create the AI Solution Factory to deliver a standardised approach that people can have confidence in.'***

Martin Paver, Founder / Chair, Projecting Success

Andy Murray noted that 'this will happen with or without us', emphasising the importance of the Association engaging with members to ensure that 'we are earlyish adopters' and can harness the power of AI. He also outlined plans to establish a short-term task and finish group to explore how the Association and its members could work together to advance the use of AI for knowledge sharing and learning, with findings to be presented to the Board.

However, many of the questions raised underlined concerns about AI's fallibility and whether it can account for human behaviour.

'Moving towards a more AI-centric world will mean that we'll finally understand how fundamentally important it is to be able to read a room, because if we outsource so much of our mind into a computer, we'll recognize that our projects are delivered by feel. We like to think we're deeply rational, but we're about to meet rational man as an AI bot, who will be deeply rational, but will actually miss the point of why we're delivering something.'

Jo Lucas, Director, Co.Cre8

What makes a culture of learning?

Oliver Broadbent of GIRI Training & Consultancy closed the final session with a reminder: 'We don't learn by writing lessons learnt reports. We learn by building a culture of learning.

During the syndicate session, delegates identified the following qualities and behaviours that contribute to a culture of learning:



What can we do?

- Take one thing away and commit to making a change in the way you do things. Share that idea with others.
- Celebrate learning as an individual by sharing knowledge or seeking new experiences.
- Educate ourselves further on the role of AI so we can support or challenge its future role in projects appropriately.

The importance of creating the right conditions for learning brought us full circle to the inclusion moment delivered by Jenny McLaughlin of Heathrow Airport Ltd at the start of the conference.

'Every one of us walks into work with a nervous system that is constantly asking one question: Am I safe? ... The brain begins to divert energy away from learning and towards protection. Our focus narrows, our curiosity shrinks, our willingness to listen declines ... what we often call resistance to learn and change may not be resistance at all. It may be a response to a threat ... and if that is true, then creating the conditions where people can learn is not a well-being issue. It's not an HR issue. It's a delivery issue.'

Jenny McLaughlin, Principal Project Manager, Heathrow Airport Ltd

Points for further discussion

- Reflect on the things that weren't mentioned, such as sustainability and climate change. Why were they barely mentioned?
- Do we enjoy complexity too much? Is a simpler approach better and more deliverable?
- When things go wrong, this often points to a macho leadership style or a 'hero' leader unwilling to listen to other voices. What roles do the gender of the leader and the diversity of the team play in creating the culture we have identified as critical to future success?

Chair

Nirmal Kotecha, Chair, Major Projects Association

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Participating organisations

Accenture
Advance Consultancy
AECOM
Alliance Manchester Business School
Amentum
Anglian Water
Arcadis (UK) Limited
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