Unlocking the true value of assurance

Highlights

Highlights from the Major Projects Association half-day seminar held on 23 September 2026

MAJOR PROJECTS ASSOCIATION

Background

Project assurance is accepted as a vital tool for supporting the successful delivery of complex major projects. Properly executed, it can help achieve positive outcomes from investment and create clear alignment between a project's high-level requirements and on-the-ground delivery.

Yet achieving true value from the considerable investment of time and resource in project assurance is not always straightforward.

Assurance can look very different across the project delivery landscape. Project teams may view it as intrusive scrutiny, while sponsors rely on it for independent evidence to support investment decisions and provide confidence in delivery.

As the event highlighted, project failures rarely happen because a risk went unnoticed; more often, a red flag was raised but failed to reach the right person in time to prompt change.

The true value of assurance is unlocked only when it changes behaviour and acts as a trusted feedback loop, enabling stakeholders to make timely corrections.

> ***'Assurance, for assurance's sake, adds no value. Assurance, in a form that people can coalesce around, understand that there's an issue, and make a change, becomes where the value is added.'***

Alexandra Batey, Director, Nichols Group

Widening inclusion in the assurance process

Traditional project assurance often focuses on senior leaders and high-profile stakeholders such as Senior Responsible Owners (SROs) and directors. However, engaging a wider, more diverse range of stakeholders can yield richer findings, deeper insights, and boost programme morale.

> ***'If you work in assurance, maybe you can widen participation of who is doing it and who it is being done with. Because maybe more participation and more access can also lead to better outcomes.'***

Dr. Tayyab Jamil, Managing Director, Firewood

Valuable assurance relies on transparency, honest, and analytical rigour. Wider participation across the project delivery team can therefore lead to stronger, more effective outcomes.

What is assurance assuring? The role of the project team

A common misconception in major project delivery is that 'a project is like a shark; it has to keep moving to stay alive'. In reality, projects should only keep moving if their benefits genuinely stack up.

Yet career survival and personal or corporate ego can drive programmes forward regardless of whether it is the right thing to do.

The project management profession must therefore ask why project assurance has grown so significantly and why external oversight is needed to keep projects on track.

> ***'My challenge isn't so much to the assurance function, but to the project management profession: why have we ended up where we have? Assurance – and we are primarily focusing on third line here – is stated to be about validation, providing early visibility on risks, ensuring alignment for the project, driving innovation, building confidence and so on. If the project team is not doing all of the above, and being trusted to do so, then there is something wrong with the project team!'***

Arnab Banerjee, Consultant, AB Change Delivery

Unlike professions where competence is assumed, project management practitioners can be subject to heavy competence assurance. Poor behaviour and strategic misrepresentation can add governance and erode trust, turning assurance into a compliance hurdle to 'get a pass' rather than a tool to improve delivery performance.

> ***'As someone stated to me, 'if poor project performance requires significant independent assurance, does that not suggest we have a significant issue with project managers?''***

Arnab Banerjee, Consultant, AB Change Delivery

Enabling assurance at scale: The New Hospital Programme

The **New Hospital Programme (NHP)** is one of the UK's largest infrastructure programmes, potentially seeing up to £60 billion invested over the next two decades. It tackles assurance at scale using a systems engineering approach.

Rather than relying on heavy, retrospective audits, the programme integrates progressive assurance into its delivery lifecycle to support standardised outcomes and safe, efficient healthcare facilities.

NHP's assurance challenges are met by:

- **Managing scale and complexity:** Delivering the standardised Hospital 2.0 design across projects ranging from greenfield builds to refurbishments and RAAC hospital replacements requires a balance between national programme benefits and local Hospital Trust requirements.
- **Avoiding compliance bottlenecks:** The NHP aims to embed assurance into the operating model to reduce unnecessary layers of oversight.
- **Moving from opinion to evidence:** Digital tools support objective, traceable data rather than subjective opinions.

Key NHP strategies for success are:

1. **Build control into the operating system.** Teams should be able to verify and validate compliance continuously as projects progress.
2. **Ensure frontline capability and accountability are right from the start.** Delivery teams are trusted, supported, and empowered to get things right the first time.
3. **Automate assurance at programme scale.** Digital tools can help check compliance against standardised design rules in real time.

> ***'Our whole thinking has been about making sure we design the programme in a way that maximises the chance of achieving successful outcomes. So it's all about making sure we get what we want, as we go. Assurance is there to give confidence, but fundamentally we need to make sure that we get what we want.'***

Jonathan Morris, Technical Integration Director, New Hospital Programme

Key challenges in project assurance

A number of wider challenges were also discussed:

- **Defining and managing requirements:** Clear, outcome-based requirements must be established and maintained as designs evolve. Assurance should clarify the 'how', not establish the 'why'.
- **Cultural and behavioural resistance:** Moving from a traditional programmatic mindset to a systems-based approach requires a significant cultural and behavioural shift.
- **Competence versus compliance:** Over-reliance on assurance can signal a lack of trust in project professionals. Assurance itself does not deliver better projects; the project team must do that.
- **Balancing stakeholder needs:** Overlap between compliance, strategic direction, and local requirements risks duplication and administrative gridlock.

> ***'The articulation of the requirements might sound really mundane, but is actually the critical thing because if you're articulating the requirements as the outcome you're trying to achieve, and that's what you're verifying, that's the thing you're going to get.'***

Andrew Parks, Deputy Director – Hospital 2.0, New Hospital Programme

A holistic, systems-thinking approach can create greater stakeholder alignment and improve data flow, supporting meaningful accountability from project level into the wider portfolio, with the tempo of activity driven from the bottom up rather than the top down.

Looking beyond the programme: A systems perspective

Traditional public sector project assurance is shifting from rigid compliance towards a collaborative approach that engages the wider project team and gives stakeholders confidence that proposals are justified and will deliver value for taxpayers' money.

> ***'In considering assurance, it's really important to consider why it is needed and ultimately, I think a lot of this is driven by confidence. Leaders need confidence that the project is on track to deliver what it's meant to deliver; confidence that the investment will deliver the intended outcomes, and ultimately gives the public taxpayer confidence that money is being spent wisely on the right things.'***

Matt Ford, Sponsor, Department for Transport

Several challenges remain in delivering effective assurance in public sector projects:

- **Resource constraints:** Assurance can challenge already under-resourced public sector teams and must therefore be proportionate, justified, and agreed by all parties.
- **Multi-party structures:** Transport and infrastructure projects involve many stakeholders, creating a risk of losing the assurance 'golden thread'. A multi-party, co-sponsorship, place-based approach may be required.
- **Socio-political volatility:** Differences between national, mayoral, and council priorities can affect project benefits and stability.

- **Cultural barriers:** Assurance is frequently viewed as something 'done to' project teams rather than a collaborative tool for building mutual confidence.

> ***'I think this multi-party co-sponsorship, place-based version of assurance is actually going to become more and more important as we go forward, because each party that's investing, invests with their own requirements of what they want and what benefits and strategic objectives they have in mind.'***

Jo Lucas, Director, Co.Cre8

Rethinking governance for effective assurance

Many project delivery problems stem from issues and decisions made far above the project delivery level. Effective assurance therefore needs to look beyond individual projects and programmes to examine governance and decision-making across the wider portfolio ecosystem.

> ***'When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment where it grows, not the flower.'***

Michael Steinberg, Head of Enterprise Portfolio Management Office, Ministry of Defence

Traditional oversight can focus too heavily on micro-management rather than nurturing an environment in which successful delivery is more likely.

Key challenges highlighted included:

- Projects, programmes, and portfolios are built and structured differently, resulting in inconsistent reporting that compares 'apples and oranges'.
- Decision-making boards can focus heavily on immediate deliverables and short-term milestones, driven by frequent personnel changes.
- Programmes and portfolios can operate without sufficient awareness of each other's activity, missing crucial interdependencies and risks.
- National and local priorities can conflict, creating tension between wider governmental goals and local delivery needs.
- Without a standardised data dictionary across departments, it is difficult to organise information effectively or use it efficiently with artificial intelligence and machine learning tools.

> ***'We have the technology today to keep moving data up through the system. What we don't have is a data dictionary; we don't have a common definition of what a milestone is or what a risk is. And as a result, it's all 'apples and oranges'. We need a common set of explanations of what it is that we need.'***

Michael Steinberg, Head of Enterprise Portfolio Management Office, Ministry of Defence

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Points for further discussion

- How can project, programme, and portfolio data and information be more aligned to help create enterprise-wide visibility and improve AI implementation?
- How can we define a new multi-party, co-sponsorship, place-based approach to assurance?
- What can public programme and portfolio stakeholders do to accelerate learning from one project to the next?

Chair

Alexandra Batey, Director, The Nichols Group

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Participating organisations

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Balfour Beatty plc
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