Podcast: The human side of major projects: Supporting stakeholder wellbeing

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Transcript

Andy Murray

Welcome to the Major Projects Association podcast. I'm Andy Murray, Executive Director of the Major Projects Association, and today I'm joined by Tom Hacker and John Sayer, both of Ardent. Today's session is about stakeholder engagement and how we can care for the people whose lives are affected by the projects we deliver.

This conversation connects two Association seminars. At our event in June in Liverpool, Rethinking Consents and Planning, we explored planning reform, the different routes to securing consent, and the choices we face in developing our projects. We had some great case studies, including Peak Cluster and United Utilities, and we discussed how consenting is also a leadership challenge. It requires judgement about when to make decisions, how to handle uncertainty, and how to engage constructively with communities. Ardent's Pippa Macaulay brought the human experience into focus through her inclusion moment, showing how listening to people and acting on their local knowledge can improve project delivery.

But the seminar left us with a challenge: how do we hear from the people who are the quietest, or who are finding it hardest to participate?

Looking ahead to 10 November in Manchester, our seminar Beyond Compliance: Prioritising Health, Safety and Wellbeing in Major Projects will explore leadership, workplace culture, mental health, and the conditions that help people thrive while delivering demanding projects. But with that strapline of 'beyond compliance', what we're going to do today is go beyond the project team. We're putting that conversation into the wider context of the residents, businesses, landowners, and communities experiencing the change that our projects will bring.

For a project team, a milestone might mean an application submitted or the land secured, but for someone affected, it might mean uncertainty about their home, their livelihood, or the future of their neighbourhood.

That's why I'm really pleased to put a spotlight on the excellent work that an Association member, Ardent, is doing through its Stakeholder Wellbeing Assistance Programme, or SWAP.

Developed with mental health partner Vita Health Group, it combines training for project teams with access to confidential wellbeing support for affected stakeholders.

Joining me are Tom Hacker, Ardent's Senior Director and Head of Stakeholder Engagement and Communications, and John Sayer, Head of Development Consultancy and former Chair of the Compulsory Purchase Association. Tom, John, welcome.

I'm going to dive straight in. I've used the SWAP label, the Stakeholder Wellbeing Assistance Programme. Tom, I believe this is your baby. Tell me all about it. How did it come about, and what does it involve?

Tom Hacker

Thanks for asking. It's something we're really passionate about, and we enjoy talking about it. I appreciate being called my baby, and I think that might be pretty much true! But Ardent got behind this very quickly. I think it brought together a number of different ambitions that people had within the business and beyond it.

We started to focus on how we could better support stakeholders who were impacted by the projects we were working on. Around the same time, or shortly after, the Compulsory Purchase Association started to look at doing its own study into the scale of the challenge. A couple of other organisations were doing similar pieces of work, and some promoters had started looking at localised solutions on projects. Everybody was focusing on it because the wellbeing of people impacted by projects was being recognised as an issue.

We spent a lot of time working with our partner, Vita Health Group, to develop the Stakeholder Wellbeing Assistance Programme. In really simple terms, it means we can work with the promoter of a project to identify the people who will be most impacted. That might, for example, be people with an interest in land within the red-line boundary or order limits of a scheme, who are going to be impacted permanently or temporarily.

This is their land, their property, and the way they live their lives. We can give them access to a wellbeing support service for a short period or potentially a much longer period. That includes things like counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy, or more advanced therapies. We also have partners in communities across the United Kingdom, so people can access support in the way that best suits them, including through virtual and digital services.

We're really proud of it and pleased to be talking about it, because that's the only way we can let people know it exists.

Andy Murray

That's great. Thanks, Tom, for that overview. Perhaps we'll come back to the practicalities of how the programme works. But John, I'd like to bring you in. As I mentioned when introducing you, you're a former Chair of the Compulsory Purchase Association and have a background in regeneration. I assume you've seen a lot of this from the other side of the fence, from the

communities that are affected. What does it feel like to be on that side of the fence? What's your experience?

John Sayer

I think that's a good point. When we think about what a good project looks like, there's a lot of measurement around cost, delivering on time, health and safety, specific public benefits, and all the other things associated with a major project.

But what's often slightly overlooked is: what does it actually feel like? What's the experience of living through that period of change, whether you're living or operating your business on the periphery of a major construction area, or your home or business is displaced somewhere else?

People are living and operating in a very different space. If you're delivering a major project, you might have a really big spreadsheet with lots of lines for different properties, and you know you need to acquire those properties to deliver the wider benefit of the scheme.

But on the opposite side of the fence, those lines on a spreadsheet represent someone's home, or someone's business that may have been passed down through generations. It could be a home where people's children grew up and went to school nearby. There's an individual human element, case by case, which is often wholly misunderstood.

Andy Murray

Yes, it's moving from that spreadsheet view to the human side of it. We often think about the impact of construction and the activities when work starts, but I'm assuming your findings, which led you to develop SWAP, are that a lot of that anxiety and worry starts as soon as you're even talking about a potential project, let alone once you've submitted an application.

Tell me about the lifecycle of SWAP. When would someone first get involved with the programme, and what sort of support can they get in those early stages?

Tom Hacker

It depends on some choices the client or promoter makes about how early they want to make this available. In general, what we say to promoters is that if you're looking at seven or eight different routes for a rail line, offering it to seven or eight times the number of people who might eventually be affected isn't a good use of money. It might even create more anxiety for people, because they're being offered the service while also being told there's a lot of optioneering and work left to do.

It's probably more applicable once you've reached a level of certainty about who is going to be most impacted, and definitely once you've got a preferred option and are clear about who will be affected if the project goes ahead. That's when you should be exploring all the ways you can give people support.

It's useful to remember this isn't just a social value activity. I don't want people to listen to the podcast and think it purely is. There's definitely an element of that: as a business, we want to consider how people are impacted and how we're supporting them.

But we're also passionate about the effective delivery of infrastructure and regeneration projects. Where people are suffering from extreme stress and anxiety, or even mild levels of stress and anxiety, quite understandably, that has operational consequences. It can negatively affect our ability to engage with those people and involve them in the process.

John, you need to engage effectively with people to go through an effective acquisition process and avoid having to use a compulsory purchase order. You know what sort of headspace people

need to be in to do that. It's not necessarily possible when somebody's suffering from stress and anxiety, and at the very least it makes it a lot harder.

John Sayer

It does. To put it in context, the Compulsory Purchase Association report considered how, on major projects, people often think of compulsory acquisition as an event, when someone's property is acquired. But there can be a 10- or 15-year period leading up to that, with proposed route announcements, red-line boundary changes, and all those kinds of things.

If you're looking at a 15-year period before you're actually displaced, in terms of family life that could be the entirety of someone's childhood. When you introduce all those challenges and stresses, the ability to get on with your normal day-to-day life, operate your business as usual, or plan where you might need to relocate your home or business takes a huge amount of bandwidth. It's inevitable that people will be challenged from a mental health perspective.

Andy Murray

There are lots of parallels with the medical profession, aren't there? When you have a diagnosis, for example, being in the right frame of mind to understand it and make choices that help you move forward. I can see parallels with the work of organisations such as Macmillan Cancer Support, helping people come to terms with difficult circumstances. For many people, finding out about these project ideas will be a significant shock, just as a health diagnosis can be for some people.

Tom, you mentioned that the programme includes training for developers. Does that include discussions about when to engage and timing considerations, including avoiding anxiety by not communicating too early?

Tom Hacker

Yes, it does. We were clear from the outset that this needed to offer support to impacted stakeholders. But we also needed to give the practitioners in the project team, whether our employees or people working alongside the promoters' internal teams, the tools, skills, and resources to engage with people effectively.

The training helps people understand the stress and strain individuals might experience as a result of being subject to a compulsory purchase order or other impacts associated with a project. As John touched on at the outset, you might have a stakeholder who, in pure engineering terms, isn't necessarily impacted because they're outside the red-line boundary or order limits. But the road outside their house could be closed for extended periods, or regularly, or they could experience noise, dust, and vibration over a long period. Those things aren't insignificant to those individuals. They're serious, and we try to help practitioners understand their impact.

It's an interesting parallel with people suffering from ill health, who can benefit from support to understand their choices and what they're going through. We've also got to remember that projects that justify compulsory purchase orders, or investments of tens of millions, hundreds of millions or billions of pounds, have immense public benefit. There is a much wider benefit to these schemes.

We wanted practitioners to understand that a project can have negative consequences for individuals that we wish we could avoid. We've explored different ways of avoiding them, but some are unavoidable. So we want practitioners to feel pride and confidence in the project they're progressing, while also having the skills and capability to engage with people effectively and understand what they're going through. Both things are possible.

The Compulsory Purchase Association study found that almost all, or the vast majority, of practitioners involved in these kinds of conversations suffer from stress and anxiety themselves.

That's why we were clear about providing practitioners with support so they could support others. The two things are linked: when you're working with somebody experiencing extreme stress and anxiety, that process is difficult for you too. We needed to work on both sides of that.

Andy Murray

It's interesting. So it's not just about being a responsible developer; it's also good for business. You're looking after your own staff, who will feel more confident and less anxious themselves, and the people you're engaging with will hopefully be better able to make decisions. There's a circle of benefits from that initiative.

There's an element of trust we have to overcome here as well. In my experience, people are suspicious from day one. If a developer comes to them and says, 'We've got this programme and you can get some support to help you engage with the project,' they might assume there's a catch. They may worry that it could compromise decisions they make later. How do you overcome that suspicion and gain the trust of people you need to work with?

Tom Hacker

I'm really glad you asked that, because it's something we've taken seriously. It comes back to Ardent's role in this process. We have a partner, Vita Health Group, which is one of the UK's leading providers of this type of support, and it has robust processes in place around people's privacy. There is significant legislation around this too.

But we also have to accept that people need to trust us. If they share their anxieties about how a project is impacting them, you can understand why they wouldn't want that information shared with the project team or the surveyors who engage with them day to day.

We have a completely separate team, a completely different data environment, and strict processes around where information is stored and how much is shared with the developer or promoter. We can provide a dashboard with anonymous information about the number of people who have used the service, but the client can't ask or find out who has used it, where those people live, or what types of support they're receiving. That's not part of the deal.

The promoters and developers we work with are clear from the outset that they want to protect the trust they have with the community. They want robust processes to ensure this information isn't even shared with them accidentally. They recognise how important this is.

Andy Murray

Thanks. John, I want to link back to our June seminar, where we discussed how a lot of noise can be generated around new developments. Some groups are very effective at mobilising and sharing their views with the promoter or developer. But good consenting and stakeholder engagement also mean reaching the people who haven't mobilised or organised themselves. How does this programme help us hear those quieter voices and make sure they're included?

John Sayer

That's absolutely right. I often characterise it as the most important stakeholder not necessarily being the loudest person in the room. I've attended a lot of consultation events over the years, and sometimes the people who are most affected, or will be affected for longer, are busy with other things in their day-to-day lives. It can be people with more time on their hands who are more active in consultation.

Through SWAP, the people who are uncomfortable about coming forward, a little shy or concerned about sharing their views may feel more empowered to engage. Knowing the project

understands and acknowledges the human impact on them can help people share their views more widely. You're then able to gain that understanding from a broader audience.

Andy Murray

Great, thanks. Tom, have you got any examples you can share about how these interventions have changed a developer's approach or affected an outcome? I understand you can't name examples because of the agreements around anonymity, but it would be useful to bring this to life.

Tom Hacker

It's difficult, because we work with promoters who've chosen to offer this to their stakeholders, but they haven't always publicised it. Sometimes it's been offered privately.

In the cases where it's been applied, it's about offering people support, but there's also an element where stakeholders who don't necessarily need the service still recognise it as something of value. They appreciate that the promoter is acknowledging that its decision to progress with a particular option, or undertake construction in a particular location, has an impact on them.

There are a lot of great promoters out there, some that aren't so great, and a lot in between. But promoters need to take the opportunity to reflect and be honest about impacts. They spend a lot of time talking about the benefits of their projects, don't they? Sometimes we also need to face into some of the impacts, both publicly and on a one-to-one basis, and accept the extent to which we're affecting individuals.

What springs to mind, although I can't share the examples specifically, are those instances where people have said, 'I don't need this support, but I appreciate you offering it. It makes me see you in a different light, and I hope other people make use of it.' There has to be a level of acceptance of these impacts, many of which are very obvious.

Andy Murray

We've got our seminar coming up in November on Beyond Compliance, about health, safety and wellbeing. What we're hoping to explore is that this isn't a box-ticking exercise or something we do just because it's mandatory. How do we make our major projects more impactful, not just in terms of project outcomes, but also the journey through them?

What's one thing you'd like to see from our seminar in November? What's your ask of our presenters? I'll make sure I hold their feet to the fire.

Tom Hacker

If we focus on wellbeing, which is just one part of the broader theme, the thing I always want to talk to project promoters about is cost. There are obvious project costs on a spreadsheet: you see them going up or down and you want to manage them. But there are also hidden costs associated with the things we're talking about, which aren't as easy to see.

If every time you send somebody a request for information as part of your engagement with them, they don't respond and you have to chase them, or they take twice as long because it's something they're putting off, that's a cost, isn't it? Particularly where you need to engage with thousands of people at the same time.

Think about the social value benefits of supporting people's wellbeing, but also challenge yourself: are there hidden costs linked to people's stress, anxiety, or poor wellbeing that, if we

could see them, would make us act differently? That's something I think is important to challenge people on.

Andy Murray

You can hear it here: I'll bring that one up and make sure we focus on those hidden costs. Thanks, Tom. John, the same question to you. What would you like us to take away?

John Sayer

For me, the thing is to stop and cross the fence every once in a while. Whatever you're doing on a major project, stop and think: what is it like at this point in time on the opposite side of the project? What uncertainty are people living with? How long will that go on? At the next stage of a programme, what will the lived experience be for that person?

If you periodically stop and think about that, you can make much better project decisions and potentially have far less of an impact on individuals.

Andy Murray

Brilliant. That's the classic 'walk in someone else's shoes for a day', and you'll get some good insight. Thanks for that.

Sadly, we're coming out of time. We make a promise when we record these that we'll try to keep them under 30 minutes. Regular listeners will know we close out our podcasts with a track.

We've been thinking about songs for this one, so I'm going to vary the usual approach. I'll offer a choice of three and let John and Tom pick one. Thinking about people being worried about a new major project and the impact it will have, I had R.E.M.'s 'Everybody Hurts'. That might be a bit grim, but let's put it on the table. To lighten things up, I thought of the Toy Story theme tune, 'You've Got a Friend in Me', which would be nice in terms of the support provided.

Some people know I'm a fan of Aretha Franklin, and I was also thinking of 'Try a Little Tenderness' in the way we do our projects. John, Tom, what's your choice? R.E.M.'s 'Everybody Hurts', 'You've Got a Friend in Me' or 'Try a Little Tenderness'? John, you go first.

John Sayer

I'm going to say it's definitely not R.E.M., because that's too grim, and the other two are level pegging for me.

Andy Murray

Tom, you've got the coin flip.

Tom Hacker

I really like 'Try a Little Tenderness'. I think everybody can tread softly on these things. That's not about not moving forwards. We do move forwards; we just try a little tenderness.

Andy Murray

Brilliant. On that note, thank you, Tom, and thank you, John, for sharing your SWAP initiative with us. And Myrna, if you could tee up the music to play out the show.