

Mission-led major projects

The role of major projects in delivering the Government's mission and the impacts the mission may have on how major projects are governed and delivered

Perspectives



Background

Mission-based government is a strategic approach to public administration that focuses on tackling large-scale societal challenges by aligning policy, investment and delivery across departments and sectors.

Rather than working within siloed departmental objectives, missions provide cross-cutting, outcome-orientated goals designed to deliver long-term impact.

Inspired by models such as Mariana Mazzucato's work and adopted in various forms globally, the UK Government has begun to operationalise this approach through the **Plan for Change: Government Missions to 2029**, supported by the Invest 2035 industrial strategy and new governance structures like the Missions Delivery Unit, cross-departmental Mission Boards and the Industrial Strategy Council.

Major Projects Association roundtable objectives

Ahead of the publication of the Government's **Industrial Strategy** and **Ten-Year Infrastructure Strategy** the Major Projects Association hosted two roundtable events for senior strategists and decision makers aimed at enabling a three-way conversation between government, industry and academia to explore the practical changes, capabilities and good practice needed to deliver in this 'Mission-led' context.

This report reflects the discussions at those events and on the content of the now published Strategy papers to highlight the themes that are most important to the major projects sectors and the changes required to deliver in a mission-led world.

Firstly, to set the scene we had an overview of one of the missions (Clean Energy Superpower) and a first-hand account of how it feels within Government with the shift to the missions-based approach.

We then explored three aspects of how we may need to adjust our thinking of major projects in a context of missions-based government:

1. How can we balance accountability and move to genuine portfolio management?
2. How can industry and infrastructure clients help with mission delivery?
3. What is stopping us from moving to a more mission-based approach?

Scene setting: what has changed in the move to a mission-based approach?

A view from inside Government:

- Greater clarity on how things fit together.
- Secretary of State for each Mission.
- Focused on a small number of key deliverables.
- More intensive review process.
- Emphasis on solving and removing 'blockers'.
- The power of a mission to align a large team.
- Systems management style leadership.
- Different ways to collaborate being sought.

Our discussions preceded the publication of the Government's Infrastructure Strategy and Ten-Year Industrial Strategy, but it is useful to reflect on their content and their implications. One of the most striking contrasts today is how the Ten-Year Infrastructure Strategy and the Industrial Strategy approach the UK's economic and social future from different, but complementary, angles.

The Infrastructure Strategy is distinctly place-based. It champions regional investment, connectivity, and the empowerment of devolved institutions. It views infrastructure as the enabler of growth, resilience, and inclusion in local contexts.

The Industrial Strategy, on the other hand, is more sector-based. It targets areas of economic productivity such as clean energy, advanced manufacturing and life sciences. It seeks to stimulate innovation, boost skills, and align industry with long-term missions like net zero.

What is becoming clear is that the success of either strategy depends on the other. For major projects, this convergence demands a new mindset – one that treats sectoral innovation and regional delivery not as separate silos, but as part of a whole-system approach.

How can we balance accountability and move to genuine portfolio management?

Context

A mission-based approach to commissioning and delivering projects implies a shift from the current highly transactional approach – where each project is considered on its own merit requiring an isolation of attributable benefits – to an approach that considers major projects as part of a portfolio of initiatives that in aggregate contribute to the delivery of the missions. It will require adding portfolio management capability to government project delivery, but in a way that avoids any dilution of project accountability and any increase/duplication of management overheads.

What we discussed

- We currently don't work cross-sector or even cross-project – the regional approach of water companies being one example of siloed working.
- The world has moved on, and client bodies need to understand that and change with it.
- We need capable clients with whom we can work on a platform of trust.
- Client organisations need to upskill, so they are not so reliant on consultants and contractors. This will alter the balance of the knowledge and power in the relationship.
- Regulators have a unique position but for too long have operated as commercial regulators only and not contributed to strategic national capacity and portfolio management; this must change.
- Some practical changes would encourage portfolio working:
 - » Allow budget sharing in a portfolio and a move away from annualised to project life cycle budgets.
 - » Devolving decision-making to those closest to the project would drive accountability.
 - » Spending reviews must align with the mission and motivate departments to work together.

What we can do

'Much has been made of the need to embrace a systems management style of leadership for this we can learn much from NASA's Apollo mission where the aim was to manage the project with an overall understanding of the whole system so that all complex elements were properly integrated.'

To achieve this the entire management structure was overhauled and a new management function whose principal purpose was to radically improve communication was introduced. Matrix management systems that require different teams in different places to adopt similar structures and to have close communication with their counterparts were adopted. The framework was also extended to contractors and suppliers and although there was a clear chain of command, information flowed across projects and up and down management structures creating a more dynamic and agile approach.'

Mazzucato, M. (2020) Mission Economy, p.71

We must work towards a much greater understanding of the interconnectedness of national infrastructure projects using spatial mapping and digital tools to bring that to life in order that we can understand their benefits and manage their outcomes better.

Whilst the recent Industrial Strategy and Infrastructure Strategy are based on that approach there are still key gaps which undermine its coherence. For example, building materials to support house building or a nuclear waste repository to underpin nuclear ambitions.'

Précis of participants' comments, Mission-led Projects Roundtable May 2025

How can industry and infrastructure clients help with mission delivery?

Context

The Government's 'Kickstarting Economic Growth' mission aims to drive UK-wide productivity, innovation and inclusive prosperity. It focuses on revitalising place-based economics, supporting high potential sectors and crowding in private investment. Major projects are a central enablers and further detail in the Infrastructure Strategy, Industrial Strategy and Defence Spending Review show how important place-based projects and portfolio and spatial planning will be for the future. This requires a change of mindset from all involved.

What we discussed

- Delivering better lives for people in the UK is a great mission to attract people and develop skills – it needs to be more visible.
- A capable/intelligent client can make a huge difference. This relates not only to technological and project knowhow but risk management and innovative ways of working.

What we can do

'Missions must change the way that public and private sector work together. This requires a rebalancing of the system through which projects are commissioned and delivered. Public institutions will need to rebuild their in-house capabilities to proactively manage a portfolio of projects. Without in-house capability the Government will have continue to outsource work and knowledge to third parties such as consultancies, think tanks and the private sector.'

Mazzucato, M. (2020) Mission Economy, p.129

'We have to acknowledge that "cost certainty, costs" and encourage experimentation and innovation within the project portfolio to find the best overall solution even if that means accepting open ended costs at early project stages.'

Andy Murray, Executive Director, Major Projects Association

'It means using instruments such as loans, grants and procurement to drive the most innovative solutions to tackle specific problems.'

Mazzucato, M. (2020) Mission Economy, p.8

What is stopping us from moving to a more mission-based approach?

Context

Mission-based thinking cannot be based on the status quo. It is not just about setting [new] rules for the game but changing the game itself so that a new direction can foster change. Governments cannot pursue missions alone they must work alongside purpose-driven businesses and organisations to achieve them.

What we discussed

- We need a new brand of leader who will embrace a systems management approach. Our **'No More Heroes'** report tells us what that looks like – a kinder, more inclusive, listening leader who will inspire a team to achieve a mission.
- We need more comprehensive national, spatial planning to give a more visible and tangible basis to drive portfolio and programme integration and collaboration.
- We need to completely review the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP) and recognise that the bulk of its content is digital and transformation NOT infrastructure.
- In the net zero world the no build option has to be a real option. Building for growth should not damage net zero goals.

Finally...

- Mission-based projects need better communication with the public and other stakeholders. They need to allow for the time and space to innovate and generate overspill benefits. The mistakes of HS2, in this regard, must not be repeated.

To quote Bridget Rosewell CBE at the Association's recent **Prestige Lecture** *'What do I need to believe for this project to be worth doing? It comes down to judgement and belief. It starts with the story.'*

What we can do

'Mission-based projects lend themselves to solving complex and wicked problems and putting citizens at the centre of the process to make sure the system is working for them. Hence, we must work hard to broaden and deepen stakeholder engagement so that project outcomes are communicated better. East West Rail as an 'Economic Corridor' rather than a transport project is a good example, whilst place-based projects like the Barrow Regeneration linked to the Defence Review, are ideal for Citizen Assembly discussions.'

Précis of participants' comments, Mission-led Projects Roundtable May 2025

Real change evident from the Spending Review

The recent Spending Review from the Chancellor triggered a series of changes, which embed a commitment to new ways of doing things and amount to a fundamental change from how we have been accounting for and delivering major projects for the past 30 years – [see a précis in our blog](#).

Treasury wants Departments to go beyond traditional cost-benefit and delivery metrics to account for the real-world outcomes of their projects – including wider economic benefits. This requires greater focus on benefits frameworks and a joined-up evaluation – for example the link between transport to housing. The Spending Review reinforces the demand for mature portfolio management, integrated assurance and a change to how success is defined and measured – all critically required for a missions-based approach.

'The Government is fostering an entrepreneurial state, which will support business investment and catalyse growth. It allows Government to invest alongside the private sector, through equity investments, loans and guarantees. The review hints at a more open stance toward private capital and blended financing models. Major projects may see increased expectations to explore alternative funding approaches and partnerships, particularly in areas where public capital is constrained.'

'The Government's fiscal rules recognise financial assets held by Government, encouraging investments that support growth while generating a return for the Exchequer, [will be] delivered largely through expert public financial institutions including the National Wealth Fund and British Business Bank.'

Included in the detail of Spending Review report is the news that the Government is planning to increase the funding of several new and existing public sector financial institutions – to help prime the pump for major projects and 'crowd in' other investors.

A somewhat unnoticed change announced in Rachel Reeves' speech was to fiscal rules – investments made by the state are now treated as assets, which affects how we calculate indebtedness. Very simply, if the state invests, say £20bn, in new energy infrastructure then the nation's assets may also increase by £20bn depending on the fair market value of the asset. The significance is that capital investment decisions can be made outside of the borrowing limits that the Government has committed to.

Do we need to weave a new supply logic for major projects?

Mike Lewis – Professor of Operations and Supply at the University of Bath

Delivering national infrastructure relies on a complex interwoven system of materials and suppliers. At our first roundtable briefing on mission-led projects Professor Mike Lewis encouraged us to stop referring to this as a simple supply chain as it belies the complexity of issue.

In the era of highly globalised production, supply of goods relies on complex and interdependent systems with products frequently crossing international borders multiple times.

One seemingly small event in one region or sector can have wide reaching ramifications. For example, a fishing dispute in the North China Sea created global shock waves in the Rare Earths market.

But is it the panic and chaotic response that is the real cause of the problem rather than the incident itself? Building resilience into our manufacturing base can mitigate the effects if we manage for complexity.

Other supply challenges are less complex and of our own making. For a number of materials and skills key to our Industrial Strategy there has been organised abandonment of our ability to manufacture at scale (think bricks and steel) or construct (think Nuclear Plants). This has left us with 'weak capability and thin institutional memory' which will take decades to reverse.

In the Industrial Strategy, the Government have committed to the creation of a new Supply Chain Centre to map, monitor and report on these issues by the end of 2025. The previous Government produced a report in 2024 entitled **Critical Imports and Supply Chain Strategy** in response to shocks such as Covid and the war in Ukraine.

For major projects it has long been an aspiration to create a centralised resources register which would support the forecasting, manufacture and phasing of supply for certain key construction resources such as steel, concrete, bricks etc, the time to create that may be now.

From our discussions and reflections on the Government's direction of travel it is obvious that interconnectedness is key to success in the way that we visualise, commission and deliver projects for the future. Our 2025 **Annual Conference** will build on this theme and examine what it means for our members and the sector in practice.

The Major Projects Association's 2025 Annual Conference will delve into what the shift from transactional to portfolio-based project thinking means in practice. From reforms to Green Book with the introduction of place-based business cases, to the formation of mission boards and NISTA, the major projects landscape is being reshaped to enable interconnected, system-wide thinking. How should project sponsors, clients, contractors, advisors, investors and regulators respond? What capabilities will we need? And how do we deliver at mission or portfolio level without losing sight of accountability at project level.

Through keynote contributions, sector case studies, and interactive syndicate work, the conference will spotlight the systemic shifts required across policy, planning, procurement, and delivery. Delegates will hear insights on how spatial planning, systems and portfolio approaches can break down silos – both within government and across industry.

This is not just a conference about what needs to change – but how we change. It's an opportunity to shape the future role of major projects in delivering public value and national resilience.

You can read the Association's reviews of the Government's key strategy documents mentioned in this report at:

**Spending
Review**

**Defence
Review**

**Industrial
Strategy**

**Infrastructure
Strategy**

In summary

Taken together, the Spending Review, the Industrial Strategy review, the Ten-Year Infrastructure Strategy, and the Government's overarching Plan for Change offer a comprehensive – if complex – blueprint for the UK's future. But that blueprint will only be realised through major projects that can operate at the intersections of place, sector, and mission.

Our roundtable discussions showed that business leaders and their teams are more than capable of meeting the challenges ahead, but a significant rebalancing of priorities and a move to a more open portfolio architecture within the sector will require proactive change to be made, this is not just 'business as usual'.

At the Major Projects Association, we will continue to explore what this means in practice: how delivery models must evolve, how leadership must adapt, and how systems thinking can help projects become more than the sum of their parts.

With thanks to all those who contributed to the discussions which have led to this report.

List of contributing organisations:

AECOM

Agilia Infrastructure Partners

Association for Project Management (Assurance Special Interest Group)

Ardent Management Limited

Arup

Balfour Beatty plc

Department for Energy Security and Net Zero

East West Rail Company

Heathrow Airport Ltd

Major Projects Association

National Infrastructure & Service Transformation Authority (NISTA)

Saïd Business School

Scottish Power

Sir Robert McAlpine

Stantec UK Ltd

Thames Water

The Water Services Regulation Authority (OFWAT)

Turner & Townsend

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