

The rise of the delivery partner

Highlights

Highlights from the Major
Projects Association event
held on 5th November 2025



**MAJOR PROJECTS
ASSOCIATION**

The foundations for this event were set by a **full day seminar** in March 2025 that explored trends in the procurement of goods and services for major projects in the UK and globally. This identified the 'rise of the delivery partner' as a particular global trend that should be explored further.

'Industry clients are facing unprecedented challenges – size and complexity of projects, securing funding, stakeholder requirements, supply chain capacity and resultant cost and performance pressures. This is shifting the market towards buying more comprehensive and integrated Asset and Programme Management services.'

Murray Rowden, Managing Director – Global Head of Infrastructure, Turner & Townsend

Siobhan Mulcahy, Head of Programme and Project Capability, NATS, concluded the Inclusion Moment with a very relevant point for the seminar: true collaboration is based on being open-minded, and only by being open-minded and working together can we actually achieve the outcomes we're striving for.

Defining the delivery partner model

Chair of the event, Murray Rowden, Managing Director – Global Head of Infrastructure, Turner & Townsend, provided an overview of three different partnerships:

- **Programme partner** – setting up major programmes and projects for success; delivering client-focused outcomes.
- **Delivery partner** – executing the delivery strategy for major programmes and projects, driving performance and providing intelligent project prediction.
- **Portfolio partner** – driving the performance of asset portfolios through better use of existing assets, and achieving higher levels of capital and operating performance and efficiency.

Professor Graham Winch, Professor of Project Management, Alliance Manchester Business School, broadened out the role of the delivery partner with a starting assumption: capable owners need to have all the capabilities to fulfil owner functions in-house. Yet owner teams are -an overhead cost for the owner organisation. So, they can only staff for the business-as-usual level of investment projects. For any expansion in the project portfolio, or a particularly large project, they need help. This is where the delivery partner comes in.

Delivery partners complement owner capabilities; they do not replace them, and specifically they cannot:

- Supply any engineering or works packages – that's the main difference from Engineering, Procurement, and Construction Management.
- Replace owner/sponsor (SRO) functions.
- Manage external project stakeholders.
- Be the contracting party for supply packages.
- Turn project outputs into project outcomes i.e. they cannot realise benefits.
- Be accountable for project success – they can only be responsible.

Owners need to think carefully through which capabilities they need to complement. Graham recommended a report by PwC, **Engineering, Procurement and Construction Management (EPCM) and Delivery Partner Models**, that explores these points in more detail.

Chris Enoch, Transport Business Development Director, Bechtel UK & Ireland, expanded on examples set out by Graham that involved Bechtel. Chris provided an overview of the range of delivery partner models and how these relate to fee/incentivisation, risk transfer, level of contingencies and owner involvement, influence and flexibility.

'Success depends on trust, clarity of roles, and shared (incentivised) outcomes.'

Chris Enoch, Transport Business Development Director, Bechtel UK & Ireland

Chris concluded that the delivery partner is a powerful model that fosters shared accountability, agility and trust, but we should ensure that we:

- Choose the right delivery structure and team.
- Take the time to set up for success.
- Understand and empower the supply chain.
- Align all parties and evolve the approach.
- Define and control the interfaces.
- Develop and nurture the next generation.

Case studies and evolving approaches

Laura Doughty, Head of Strategy – Major Projects, Sellafield Ltd, set out how Sellafield went down what some might think is a drastic path: they took several years out to design a whole new delivery model and procure partners for 20 years, committing approximately £7 billion to the partnership.

This was necessary for Sellafield to deliver major projects better than it ever had, and resulted in the **Programme and Project Partners** (PPP) model which consists of five partner organisations:

1. Lead integration partner
2. Design and engineering partner
3. Civil management partner
4. Process management contractor
5. Sellafield (5th partner)

Six years in, Sellafield has a body of evidence which indicates that outcomes are being achieved and the partnership is being leveraged to achieve wider benefits for Sellafield, the West Cumbrian community and the national economy. That's not to say it has been easy, and Laura shared some key learning points in adopting this partnership approach:

- Collaboration is not a choice. It's just a question of how you do it.
- A different leadership approach is needed as most leaders lead teams who belong to multiple organisations that aren't theirs.
- The level of sharing creates anxiety for different parties from time to time.

David Bray, Delivery Director, East West Rail (EWR), provided insights to the decisions being made on whether to engage a delivery partner. As Chris previously set out, this starts with taking time to choose the right delivery structure and team. The starting point was thinking about EWR's role, recognising this has changed over the last five years. The headline is that EWR wants to be a strong, intelligent client – this means being focused on the mission and owning the risks.

'Clients always own the overall risk for a portfolio/programme, so don't pretend otherwise.'

David Bray, Delivery Director, East West Rail

Be absolutely clear about those risks and manage them well by having the right people within the client organisation that can really mitigate those risks. That left three options for EWR:

1. Buy services – get a delivery partner.
2. Ramp up and get full client capability. But, what happens to all those people at the end? There could be 700 to 800 people.

3. Buy the best people from the supply chain.

EWR have decided on option 3, which is more in the alliancing than the delivery partner space.

Dr Simon Addyman, Associate Professor of Project Management, The Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, UCL, and Matthew Botelle, Global Major Programmes Director, Mace Consult, presented findings of a collaborative study between UCL and Parsons (Matthew's previous employer) into the Programme Delivery Partner role. The study, ***Exploring the Role of a Programme Delivery Partner***, identified five themes, to be addressed by both practitioners and academics:

1. **Organisation** – from static to dynamic processes.
2. **Integration** – from an organisational to interorganisational perspective.
3. **Initiation** – from planned models to a stable state of dynamic adaptation.
4. **Capabilities** – from organisational capabilities to routine dynamics.
5. **Collaboration** – from relationship management to ways of relating.

These themes resonated across the other speakers' presentations, and were rolled into possible implications/solutions/ways forward for key issues Matthew and Simon see repeated in major projects:

- Overspecification
- Oversimplification of key risks
- Optimism bias

Simon proposed cross-industry collaboration as a way forward, drawing in academia and practitioners. He referenced a new innovation network in his research centre at The Bartlett School, UCL: the **Centre for Construction Project Organising**, which is bridging this gap between theory and practice. How do we engage in a dialogue together and co-create knowledge between suppliers, regulators, tier twos, tier threes, clients, sponsors, and commercial managers? It's all about how people interact with management systems, and documents we humans write. These are social systems we have the opportunity to reconstruct.

Future directions and industry reflections

Katie Liszka, Sector Lead for Infrastructure – Energy & Nuclear, Laing O’Rourke, stressed a point previously raised by Chris Enoch. A delivery partner is only part of the story for a successful project, and you still need the remainder of the project to have collaborative contracting in the supply chain, fair apportionment of risk, and alignment of outcomes – as well as environments which enable positive and good behaviours and relationships.

‘When using a delivery partner, it’s really important to think about where and when you best play in your contractors, particularly to get value from early contractor involvement.’

Katie Liszka, Sector Lead for Infrastructure – Energy & Nuclear, Laing O’Rourke

The final panel session, chaired by Jason Tucker, Director of Commercial Operations, Anglian Water and Chair of the Infrastructure Client Group, explored, ‘What next for the delivery partner model?’

The questions addressed by the panel included:

- How much of an issue is conflict of interest in the delivery partner model?
- Does the rise of the delivery partner signal an end of the traditional tier one contractor?

- Is there a link between emergence of the delivery partner and how government, on a cyclical basis, organises its pipeline of delivery and how it’s funded?
- Does the delivery partner have a role through an advisory route or a mediation route to help create the right commercial arrangements within a project?

In closing the event, the Chair drew out his conclusions from the discussions:

- There are a lot of different definitions and different models. But that’s not wrong. One size does not fit all.
- Key features in the application of the delivery partner are trying to address complexity, uncertainty and emerging scope.
- Don’t try and guess your supply chain in five years’ time, because it could be different. Agility is needed with a dynamic approach, irrespective of delivery model.
- There are better conversations in the marketplace about the next stage of alliancing – the second generation.
- There is the capacity and capability issue; it’s finite. So this is a challenge we need to think about going forward.
- All parts of industry have a key role to play in all of this. It’s about thinking where you play and who you play with.

Points for further discussion

- Can delivery partners be used to disaggregate the supply chain?
- How can the supply of appropriately skilled delivery partner resources be assured?
- How do we best balance behavioural and contractual characteristics to ensure success for delivery partner and client?

Chair

Murray Rowden, Managing Director – Global Head of Infrastructure, Turner & Townsend

Contributors

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Siobhan Mulcahy, Head of Programme and Project Capability, NATS

Jason Tucker, Director of Commercial Operations, Anglian Water

Professor Graham Winch, Professor of Project Management, Alliance Manchester Business School

Participating organisations

AECOM

Agilia Infrastructure Partners

Alliance Manchester Business School

Amentum

Anglian Water

Arcadis (UK) Limited

BAE Systems

Bechtel Ltd

Binnies

Deloitte LLP

Department for Transport

FTI Consulting

Gardiner & Theobald

Grant Thornton UK Advisory & Tax LLP

HS2 Ltd

KPMG LLP

Laing O'Rourke

Mace Consult

Major Projects Association

Mott MacDonald

National Audit Office

National Highways

NATS

Network Rail Ltd

Nuclear Decommissioning Authority

Sellafield Ltd

Tetra Tech

The Advance Consultancy Ltd

The Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, UCL

The Water Services Regulation Authority (OFWAT)

TransPennine Express

Turner & Townsend

United Utilities plc

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