

23rd May 2023 - Public Accounts Committee Inquiry: Resetting Government Programmes (APM response)

Background to Inquiry

Both the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee have examined a number of government programmes which have needed a “reset” for various reasons.

The Committee will question two panels of witnesses on programmes that have required resets for any reason such as a reset to what the programme is delivering, how or when it will deliver, or all of these elements.

For the first panel, the Committee will question the Senior Responsible Officers of a series of major projects and programmes that have required such resets:

The Department of Transport’s Crossrail project, the Department of Work and Pensions’ Universal Credit rollout, the MoD’s Ajax tank programme and the MoJ’s electronic monitoring (or “tagging”) programme.

The second panel of witnesses will include questioning on the governance of major projects by HM Treasury and the Infrastructure Projects Authority.

This inquiry, based on an NAO investigation, will aim to set out a common framework for thinking about programme resets and support decision makers in building a realistic understanding of the challenges. The inquiry will not be looking in detail at any individual projects subject to a reset.

Evidence submitted by the Association for Project Management

1. The Association for Project Management (APM) is the Chartered body for the project management profession, with over 35,000 individual members and around 500 corporate partners. We aim for a world in which all projects succeed because, when they do, society benefits.
2. We were pleased our members were able to support the original National Audit Office (NAO) report into resetting programmes through a roundtable discussion with APM members who have reset programmes in the past.
3. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry, but the starting point should always be that, done properly, programmes and projects should not require a reset. We outline more on that below, but when a reset is required, it should not necessarily be seen as a negative. A key part of project delivery is the ability to notice issues and mitigate them before they become risks. If a reset is likely to be needed, this should not be seen as a failure.

4. When a reset is required, it must change something. This could be culture, attitude, deliverables, benefits, finances or any number of things – multiple NAO reports have suggested that projects have been reset without changing the underlying issues that led to the initial failure, so this must be addressed in the framework.
5. Any framework must also acknowledge the mental state of the project team at the time of reset. They will have been working long hours, at pace, doing everything they can to avoid a reset (because of the negative connotations of resetting), leaving them susceptible to stress and anxiety. Their mental health must be acknowledged.
6. Similarly, we should focus on the warning signs for when a project may need a reset. We're pleased to see the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) working on optimism bias in Government projects, but several NAO reports have identified a fear of speaking up as unnecessarily delaying projects, making a reset more likely. APM would like to see more work in these areas, as highlighted by the House of Lords Built Environment Committee inquiry into Infrastructure policymaking and implementation in central government.
7. Any future framework for project resets must include benefits realisation as well. Too often we define project success on scope, time and budget alone, but there is so much more to analyse including longer term benefit, social value and cultural change. Project benefit could even be linked to the UN sustainable development goals, focusing on each goal in turn, outlining how the project has impacted on each goal. We were particularly pleased to see the UN SDGs included in the IPA's Transforming Infrastructure Performance: Roadmap to 2030 report.
8. Learning legacies should also be included – we're quick to scrutinise failure, but we should also learn from successes, and we encourage NAO to highlight this, as well as the failures. Data sharing across Government departments, through a confidential portal, would help ensure we learn lessons from successful projects, and linked to this, a wider point is that we need to invest more in data skills across the civil service.
9. APM is working with the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) to help improve project delivery in Government. In particular, we supported the development of the Government Project Academy and advocate for Chartered as standard for those working on Government projects. Indeed, the IPA framework recommends possession or working towards Chartered accreditation at senior and master practitioner levels. It also recommends APM's Project Management Qualification at Practitioner level and APM Project Fundamentals Qualification at Foundation Practitioner level. The Committee may want to consider asking future inquiry witnesses whether they are Chartered. The Committee may also consider training members in the Project Fundamentals Qualification.

10. The APM Body of Knowledge acts as a guide for how to deliver projects. It identifies four key areas to consider when thinking about a new programme, which could also apply to a reset. These are:
- Setting up for success
 - Preparing for change
 - People and behaviours, and
 - Planning and managing deployment

The eighty topics within the APM Body of Knowledge, of which twenty-nine are competences in the APM Competence Framework; include topics relevant to programme success including governance, financial management, business case, portfolio shaping, reviews, assurance, capability development, transition and benefits management, stakeholder management and communication, conflict resolution, leadership and team management, planning and scheduling, resource management, budget and cost control, contract management, risk management, administrative closure of projects, closing programmes and portfolios, unplanned project endings and administrative closure of projects

11. Any new framework on resets must take note of these topics and competencies. But we caveat that if project delivery was embedded earlier in policy development then we could begin to develop projects with more chance of success. Government often talks about policy development, but less about policy delivery – project success should be considered at inception, not after policy announcements have been made. It would also be sensible to ensure the parameters and procedure for a reset are established at the development stage of a new programme, with pre-assigned gate reviews to monitor progress. This would eliminate the time needed for concerns about a reset to be raised and actioned.

12. APM's *Conditions for Project Success* research identified twelve key factors for project success. Multiple NAO reports have identified that projects requiring a reset lacked one or more of these conditions. More effort should be focused on ensuring they are covered in the beginning (thus negating the need for a reset):

- **Effective governance.** The project has clearly identified leadership; responsibilities; reporting lines and communications between all parties.
- **Goals and objectives.** The overall goal of the project is clearly specified and recognised by all stakeholders; it is not in conflict with subsidiary objectives and project leaders have a clear vision of the project outcomes.
- **Commitment to project success.** All parties involved in the project are and remain committed to the project's success; any lack of commitment is recognised and dealt with and project leadership inspires commitment in others.
- **Capable sponsors.** Sponsors play an active role in the life cycle of the project; they assume ultimate responsibility and accountability for the project outcomes.

- **Secure funding.** The project has a secure funding base; contingency funding is recognised from the start and tight control of budgets is in place to ensure maximum value is realised.
- **Project planning and review.** Pre-project planning is thorough and considered; there is regular and careful progress monitoring; the project has realistic time schedules, active risk management and a post-project review.
- **Supportive organisations.** The environment in which the project operates is project-friendly; the organisation provides support and resourcing for project activity (including financing) and access to stakeholders.
- **End users and operators.** End users or operators are engaged in the design of the project; the project team engages with users, who are able to take on what the project has produced effectively and efficiently.
- **Competent project teams.** Project professionals forming a core team are fully competent; other team members are also fully competent and the project team engages in positive behaviours which encourage success.
- **Aligned supply chain.** All direct and indirect suppliers are aware of project needs, schedules and quality standards. Higher and lower tiers of supply chains are coordinated.
- **Proven methods and tools.** Good practice project management tools, methods and techniques are applied in a way which maintains an effective balance between flexibility and robustness.
- **Appropriate standards.** Quality standards are actively used to drive quality of outputs. Adherence to other standards is regularly monitored in order to ensure delivery is to best practice levels.

13. Building on this work, *Dynamic Conditions for Project Success* focused on emergent themes in the project management profession that should also be considered. These were:

- interpersonal skills
- training & certifications
- team ethos
- technology & data
- contracts
- knowledge management
- agility
- sustainability
- diversity

The development of 'soft skills' indicated by interpersonal skills and team ethos is a key area of project delivery. Multiple NAO reports have shown this to be a key area of focus and we'd welcome focus on this in any resetting framework.

14. In conclusion, APM already advocates for project success through the Body of Knowledge, Competence Framework and our academic research, many of which would also be needed in any reset framework. We would welcome the

opportunity to share our expertise with the Committee further and support you in building a successful framework.