

Bridging the Political Divide: Why Government Projects Fail – and How Project Managers Can Improve Them

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A new report from the Association for Project Management (APM) has lifted the lid on a persistent problem in public service delivery: government-led projects are more prone to failure than their private sector counterparts. Through interviews with senior civil servants and elected MPs, the report finds that the reasons often have less to do with budget or ambition – and far more with the political and human dynamics that surround them.

Titled *The Impact of Politics on Project Success in Multi-Agent Projects*, the study outlines how fragmented interests, unstable leadership, and systemic lack of training continue to undermine project outcomes in the public sector. It also offers a path forward – one rooted in collaboration, leadership clarity, and a renewed investment in professional project management.

The Complexity Behind Public Sector Projects

Unlike many private initiatives, government projects must operate across a maze of departments, delivery bodies, political mandates, and stakeholder expectations. According to the report, this multi-agent environment creates fertile ground for tension, misalignment, and delay.

Among the most frequently cited causes of failure:

- **Power Dynamics:** Rivalry between departments, shifting political alliances, and varying interpretations of success make it difficult to establish a shared direction. As the report notes, “The influence of political adversarialism can significantly distort the execution of strategic programmes.”
- **Political Instability:** Priorities can shift overnight with changes in government or ministerial reshuffles. With funding often tied to electoral cycles, project continuity becomes vulnerable. One participant described how “a two-year policy window” barely gives time to initiate, let alone complete, a meaningful programme.
- **Frequent Role Changes:** High turnover of officials—often referred to as “churn”—can stall decision-making, create knowledge gaps, and weaken accountability. The absence of clear incentives to remain engaged long-term further worsens continuity.
- **Project Management Deficiencies:** Poor planning, vague objectives, and lack of professional development opportunities for both civil servants and elected representatives contribute to operational fragility.

These structural and human factors are compounded by the reality that many public projects are under constant media and political scrutiny, amplifying pressure while reducing risk appetite.

Characteristics of High-Performing Government Projects

Despite these challenges, the report identifies several commonalities among successful government programmes:

- **Strong, Politically Aware Leadership:** Leaders who understand how to navigate political landscapes while maintaining delivery focus are critical. These individuals ensure coordinated processes, unify teams, and maintain momentum even as external pressures mount.
- **Cross-Departmental Collaboration:** Breaking down silos between government departments and agencies is key to enabling a ‘one team’ mindset. The most effective programmes foster joint ownership and shared metrics for success.
- **Political Consensus:** Depoliticising the delivery environment—by establishing cross-party buy-in and keeping delivery teams shielded from short-term political noise—enables longer-term thinking.

These findings reinforce what project professionals often see on the ground: projects thrive not only when technical execution is sound but when leadership creates stability, cohesion, and space for focus.

Quotes That Speak Volumes

Andrew Baldwin, APM’s Head of Policy and Public Affairs, underscores the urgency of professionalising project delivery within government: “While government projects are subject to high levels of scrutiny, the impact of political dynamics is often an overlooked factor in their success or failure. To improve delivery, we must focus on building collaborative environments which are immune to the wider political discourse, whilst providing structured project management training that helps both civil servants and policymakers

navigate these unique challenges.”

He adds, “By investing in high-quality training and professional development, we can achieve more efficient project delivery through strong leadership and coordination. When we equip project leaders with the right tools and move closer to a depoliticised delivery environment, projects are more likely succeed for the benefit of the taxpayer and society as a whole.”

Six Recommendations for Reform

The report outlines six practical reforms to strengthen project performance in government settings:

- 1. Strengthen Leadership and Accountability**

Define roles and responsibilities with clarity, and ensure leadership continuity across the project lifecycle to reduce ambiguity and prevent leadership vacuums.

- 2. Build Collaborative Communities**

Move beyond interdepartmental rivalries by embedding stakeholders in unified, cross-functional teams. Create a shared identity anchored in common goals.

- 3. Improve Strategic Clarity**

Avoid vague mandates by developing transparent roadmaps and defining what success looks like from the outset. Public accountability thrives on clarity.

- 4. Enhance Project Management Capability**

Civil servants and MPs alike must be given access to structured project management training. Standardised methodologies and common language around delivery are key enablers.

- 5. Depoliticise Project Delivery**

Remove projects from the cycle of electoral politics by ringfencing delivery teams and fostering cross-party support. As the report notes, “Delivery suffers when it is viewed through a political lens rather than a societal one.”

- 6. Reform Budget Allocation**

Link project funding to clear milestones and delivery outcomes—not political timelines. This shift encourages performance-based execution and reduces pressure to chase short-term wins.

Why This Matters for Project Professionals

For project professionals, especially those engaged in public infrastructure, digital transformation, or community services, the implications are profound. This report is not simply a critique of government inefficiency—it is a call for a more mature approach to public sector delivery, one that aligns leadership, strategy, and skills with the demands of complexity.

It validates what many practitioners experience: a good Gantt chart is not enough. Navigating power structures, managing stakeholder expectations, and adapting to shifting mandates are now core competencies. Project success increasingly hinges on ‘soft skills’—influence, resilience, political literacy—as much as on scope or budget control.

This places professional training, certification, and peer learning at the heart of government delivery reform. It also reinforces the value of chartered project professionals in leading high-stakes programmes.

A Professional Mandate for Political Environments

Public sector delivery is never easy. The stakes are high, the scrutiny intense, and the environment constantly in flux. Yet as this APM report demonstrates, these challenges are not insurmountable.

With the right leadership, better collaboration, and sustained investment in professional skills, project managers can help governments navigate the politics without losing sight of the purpose. And in doing so, they can turn policy ambition into public value—one project at a time.