

# Delivering Better Projects in the Charity Sector

The Expert View



# Introduction

By Rebecca Fox, Director of Membership and Business Development

In our 2019–20 series of research reports, *The Golden Thread*, we identified charities as a sector where there was a desire for greater support and expertise in managing projects, programmes and portfolios.

The Golden Thread research found that project management in the charity sector contributes £6.61bn to the UK economy each year, and that a major portion of charities' work is project-based. Charitable organisations – whose resources are often stretched at the best of times – must therefore be confident in their ability to deliver projects, which are so vital for fulfilling their charitable purpose.

However, there are many factors that can pose a barrier to this. And while the Golden Thread report did address these at the time, we see a need for ongoing discussion and analysis, to ensure charities can continue to benefit from emerging expertise and good practice within their sector.

We held a roundtable session with representatives from a diverse range of charities and non-profit organisations to identify some of the challenges and potential solutions.

The key areas of discussion were:

1. Culture
2. People
3. The use of data
4. Principles and practices
5. Environmental factors

The main points of the discussion are summarised in this report.

If you are a charity that is interested in enhancing its project function, you may benefit from APM's Corporate Partnership Programme, which gives access to a vast range of digital tools and resources, plus many other benefits.

Alternatively, if you're a project specialist within a charity and would like to comment on these or similar issues, you can register your interest for future roundtables and forums by contacting [corporates@apm.org.uk](mailto:corporates@apm.org.uk).



## Delegates

**Gaye Andrews**  
Head of Strategic Planning, Age UK

**Jack Armstrong**  
Project and Programme Management Specialist, Plan International

**Hayley Burnell**  
Senior Portfolio Manager, Versus Arthritis

**Liz Chilton**  
One44 Complete Business Development

**John Cropper**  
Co-Founder, Pyramid Learning; Board Member, Now and Tomorrow

**Danny Edet**  
Head of PMO, United Response

**Peter Marlow**  
Chair, PM4NGOs

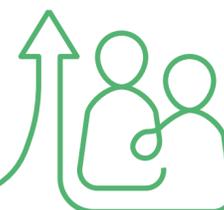
**Chris Murray**  
Chief Executive, Young Brent Foundation

**Richard Preston**  
Founder, Amyloid Action

**Nick Sharpe**  
Project Development Specialist, National Trust

**David Thorne**  
Project Manager, Canal & River Trust

Several members of the APM team also attended the roundtable, including Chief Executive, Professor Adam Boddison OBE.



# Culture

During the discussion, some delegates shared that their organisations are very established and mature in most aspects of their culture and operations, but that programme and project management was an outlier in this regard.

Organisations where project management is an emerging specialism are likely to find it harder to get the human resources they need, because they typically have fewer experienced project professionals in-house. The panel discussed how this can make it harder to assign people with specialist project management skills to every project.

The panel explored how having a culture that promotes knowledge-sharing and trusts people to work autonomously can help mitigate this to an extent. One delegate explained how their organisation has established a tiered system for their project portfolio; one where top-tier projects (those that are high risk, high cost and/or high impact) are given a dedicated project manager. Subsequent tiers have a more team-led approach, but with a communication plan that ensures adequate knowledge-sharing.

This delegate explained:

**“We have a communications and engagement plan around all projects in our portfolio and we have a network of project and programme management professionals. That’s the way we share best practice among ourselves.”**

Another suggested mitigation was for organisations to set up an internal platform or forum for project teams, where knowledge, learnings and good practice could be shared.



# People



## Engagement

Stakeholder engagement – defined by APM as the ability to work with people, both internally and externally, to build support to achieve intended outcomes – is key to increasing trust and confidence within teams.

During the roundtable, it was pointed out that organisations within the charity sector have certain advantages over other sectors when it comes to team engagement. Leveraging these can help boost team performance.

The National Trust's Nick Sharpe explained: "Clear line of sight towards social benefit and value [of a project] is important... people seeing the impact of the work they're doing.

"One thing that stands out to me is working collaboratively across organisations. Whether it's supply chains or shared communities, when it comes to driving ways that projects deliver outcomes in the big challenge areas, I think the charity sector has some real strengths in its approach that it can be proud of."

## Training and skill-sharing

The group discussed some of the factors unique to charities that may impact recruitment and onboarding of new staff members to address known capacity and skills gaps, especially in developing countries or in projects where funding is limited.

One mitigation put forward was the notion of inter-organisational skill-sharing and 'cross-fertilisation' (i.e. facilitating the transfer of knowledge and skills between organisations and sectors). It was pointed out that, in this regard, charity organisations may benefit from collaborating with the private sector.

Amyloid Action's Richard Preston encouraged charities to work with corporate organisations (and vice versa) to involve newly hired graduates in charity work to hone their skills, while enabling them to experience problem-solving in a different sector.

## Leadership

Discussing project managers as leaders, David Thorne, of the Canal & River Trust, said: "People deliver projects; processes don't. There's sometimes a reluctance for project managers to see themselves as line managers, because they're often borrowing people from other teams. But that requires more people skills because they have to get all those different people aligned to a goal."

Richard Preston called on project leaders to show courage when it comes to decision-making, commenting: "One of the big causes of project failure... is that there's a lot of fear out there. When it comes to project sponsorship, a lot of it boils down to the fact that certain people lack the courage to make decisions. They're always looking for more data and certainty, which may not be available.

"How do you drive those decisions through? By having somebody with courage... You've got to have the right people in place. Cultures differ from country to country and from town to town, so you have to be flexible enough to manage that, too."

## Watch on demand

Liz Chilton, Chair of the roundtable session, has hosted an APM webinar on leadership: *Leadership...with influence*



# The use of data

Project data analytics – the use of past and current project data to enable effective decisions on project delivery – is seen by many as having the potential to change the way projects are delivered. From artificial intelligence to machine learning and big data, the potential applications and implications for the profession are vast.

During the roundtable, Liz Chilton, of One44 Complete Business Development, commented: “For project professionals, data is becoming a big thing. Roles are becoming less hands-on and more about ‘what’s this data telling us, and what can we take from that?’ Building competence in that area is crucial.”

## Further reading

[Access APM's resource hub for project data analytics](#)



# Principles and practices

Two issues raised around principles and practices were:

- measuring the impact of a particular project methodology or approach
- making project management processes simple enough to be useable for any charity, but not oversimplified to the point it undermines good practice

One delegate commented: “One of the big hindrances for us is being able to measure performance improvements of projects when we apply methodologies and approaches – how are we actually able to see that the approach we’ve applied has had a beneficial impact and has improved the way we deliver, or the outcomes or impact felt from that project?”

“Another [challenge] is... simplifying the process enough without undermining principles and practice. If we look at things like PRINCE2, it fits for a very specific context and set of projects. In the charity sector, where we do such broad strokes and such community focused work that’s about behaviour change, how do we build models for project management that are simple enough, contain the core content to enable people to function effectively, but are simple enough to be applied holistically and consistently?”

## Further reading

[Access APM's resource hub on quality management and control](#)



## Watch on demand

APM has covered topics related to the points raised as part of its Real World Project Management webinar series. These include:

- [PRINCE2 and APM: understanding the differences and how the two qualifications can complement each other](#)
- [Making agile work in a waterfall-driven world](#)
- [Navigating success in a complex world](#)



# Environmental factors

The war in Ukraine has highlighted an uncomfortable truth: that our world is becoming increasingly Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA). Events that would once have been described as “once in a lifetime” or “once in a generation” are becoming regular occurrences. In the past three years alone, the UK has tackled a pandemic, an energy crisis, record-breaking heatwaves, widespread industrial action and an economic crisis. These challenges and others mean it’s more important than ever for project, programme and portfolio managers to be able to handle difficulty and uncertainty in the operating environment.

Delegates agreed that environmental factors will often be out of an organisation’s control, but need to be navigated nonetheless.

## Further reading

APM has published a report, [Managing Projects in Post-Conflict and Disaster Zones](#), which draws from the insights of people who have operated in some of the most challenging environments in the world, to share learnings from their experiences of delivering projects in challenging circumstances.



## Watch on demand

[An APM webinar on this topic is also available to watch - Leading Projects in Complexity and Uncertainty](#)





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