



Infrastructure Rewired

Report of the Future Infrastructure Leaders Forum
October 2026



Contents

Foreword	03
At a glance	04
01 Mind the (client) gap	08
02 Wired to innovate	12
03 Maintenance matters	16
04 Convene the place, not just the project	20
About the Future Infrastructure Leaders Forum	24
About PwC	25
Acknowledgements	26



Foreword

Infrastructure underpins economic growth, resilience and quality of life. Yet the UK's ability to renew existing assets, deliver major programmes, exploit new technology and transform places continues to be constrained by issues that are organisational as much as technical.



Jon Roe
Chair,
Future Infrastructure
Leaders Forum

The Future Infrastructure Leaders Forum brings together the next generation of leaders to examine those constraints with candour. Over the course of a year, they have collaborated on a set of challenges put to them by industry and government. This report draws together their response to those challenges: how to build stronger client delivery organisations; how to create the conditions for technology and AI adoption; how to make stewardship of existing infrastructure visible and investable; and how to turn place-based ambition into coordinated delivery.

A consistent argument runs through their analysis. Infrastructure performance depends on capable institutions. Thin, federated clients struggle to sustain culture, retain knowledge or direct complex ecosystems. Fragmented commercial and data arrangements inhibit innovation. Maintenance loses out because its benefits are largely counterfactual.

Place-based programmes falter where no institution can convene the whole system or assemble the capability and funding pathway required.

The Forum’s recommendations are practical but demanding. Organisational maturity should carry equal weight to design maturity before the supply chain is engaged. Commercial models should reward productivity and open data. Asset stewardship should be governed by forward-looking evidence of condition, resilience and systemic risk. Place-based programmes should begin with convening, capability and integrated funding, rather than waiting for a perfect institutional model.

Taken together, these proposals amount to a call to rewire the way infrastructure is led. The prize is not simply better project performance. It is a sector able to learn, innovate and protect the national assets on which society depends.



At a glance

01

Mind the (client) gap

Many major programmes operate as a federation of employers rather than a coherent organisation. Split allegiance, short tenure and outsourced core capability weaken culture, accountability and corporate memory.

Design and organisational maturity should be developed together and tested rigorously before major delivery commitments are made.

02

Wired to innovate

Technology adoption is held back by fragmented organisations, incompatible data, input-based pricing and incentives that make caution a rational response.

Clients should establish technology and data architecture early, replace prescriptive procurement with outcome-based commercial models.

03

Maintenance matters

Pre-emptive interventions are difficult to justify because the benefits are often counterfactual.

Asset owners should adopt common, forward-looking measures of health, resilience and systemic risk, supported by interoperable data, predictive monitoring and clearer reporting on the consequences of deferred renewal.

04

Convene the place, not just the project

Places are experienced as a whole but planned, funded and delivered through fragmented institutions. Integration succeeds too often through exceptional leadership rather than as the normal way of working.

NISTA should establish a place-based delivery forum for major programmes, bringing together government, infrastructure owners, investors and industry to resolve cross-sector barriers, share lessons from successful schemes and accelerate the adoption of effective delivery models.

This year's questions

01

Question 1

“Most major programmes fail to meet the planned budget, schedule or benefits. A very small number achieve all three. How should client delivery organisations be improved to increase the number of major programmes that are successful?”



Mark Wild OBE
Chief Executive
Officer,
HS2

02

Question 2

“The infrastructure sector should be at the forefront of technological advancement, leading the way in the implementation of innovative data systems. However, it is often criticised for lagging behind and struggling to adopt new solutions. How can the sector shift its approach and culture to become a leader in innovative technology solutions and AI adoption?”



Chris Scudamore
Partner and UK
Capital Projects &
Infrastructure Leader,
PwC

03

Question 3

“In the UK, our historic infrastructure underpins society. From Roman roads, Victorian railways and sewers to post-war housing and utilities, the economy rests on ageing assets. Yet debate focuses overwhelmingly on new projects rather than stewardship of what already exists. How can the UK better manage the renewal and upgrade of its current infrastructure, and articulate the need and value of maintaining and renewing existing assets?”

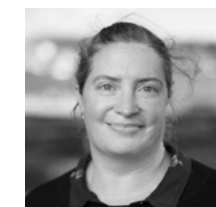


**Future
Infrastructure
Leaders - 2026
Cohort**

04

Question 4

“What are the obstacles to delivering genuinely integrated place-based projects and programmes to support local economic growth and new housing, and how could government decision-making and delivery structures be improved to address these?”



Becky Wood
Chief Executive
Officer,
National
Infrastructure
and Service
Transformation
Authority (NISTA)

01 Mind the (client) gap

QUESTION 1

Most major programmes fail to meet the planned budget, schedule or benefits. A very small number achieve all three. How should client delivery organisations be improved to increase the number of major programmes that are successful?

Mark Wild OBE Chief Executive Officer, HS2

Design and client maturity

The Forum reached a strong consensus on the significance of securing a sufficiently mature design before commencing construction or releasing any baseline figures, noting that successful delivery organisations ensure that scope, requirements and design are sufficiently mature before committing significant expenditure. By challenging requirements early, validating design assumptions and aligning expenditure with programme objectives, organisations can avoid unnecessary spend, improve productivity and maximise the likelihood of delivering the intended outcomes within budget and schedule.

The Forum built on this debate by recognising that organisation design is also an issue that is frequently not sufficiently mature through the early stages of major programmes – much like design maturity.

The federation of lanyards

From the outside, a major infrastructure client looks like any other large organisation. It has a leadership team, a headquarters, governance structures and a corporate identity. From the inside, the picture is strikingly different. Look more closely, and what emerges is less a unified organisation than a federation of lanyards: a patchwork of people drawn from many companies.

This is a defining structural feature of many client delivery organisations, and the starting point for the Forum's view of why many major programmes fall short. The issue is not the talent or commitment of the individuals involved. It is the way the organisation is constituted: a structural cause of underperformance that requires a structural solution.

The people problem: split allegiance and short-termism

Individuals contracted to a client organisation occupy an inherently ambiguous position. They are there to provide capability the client cannot itself supply, but their identity, career trajectory and financial rewards remain anchored elsewhere. Pay, performance assessment, promotion and development all sit principally with their employer, not the programme. The result is a split allegiance that, however professionally managed, works against cohesion.

Short tenure compounds the problem. Major programmes operate for decades; many contracted roles last only a few years. Individuals are therefore rarely present long enough to develop a genuine stake in long-term outcomes. The client may also have limited control over who is deployed, and constraints on how those people are incentivised and managed. Ultimately, this limits the client's ability to shape the human environment in which delivery takes place.



The erosion of corporate memory

This churn does more than disrupt culture. It erodes corporate memory, the institutional understanding of why decisions were made, what was tried and failed, and what the programme's founding ambitions were. As people rotate, knowledge walks out with them. Initiatives stall, mistakes are repeated and decisions unpicked because their rationale or sponsors have been lost.

Corporates invest in processes and technologies that encode knowledge in the organisation rather than leaving it in individuals. Many major programmes, under persistent delivery pressure, often underinvest in this function. The consequence is organisations that, in human terms, age normally but institutionally, forget.

When cultures collide

A healthy organisational culture is not a luxury. It is an operational asset: the substrate that shapes decisions, conflict, information flow and performance. Building and sustaining it is one of leadership's most important responsibilities.

A federated client imports the cultural and behavioural norms of many employers; different management philosophies, approaches to risk and expectations of how work should be done. Strong leadership can create coherence, but the effort required is disproportionate and the risk of fragmentation remains. The Forum believes both the risk and the resources needed to manage it are routinely underestimated.

The alignment illusion

Major programmes devote considerable effort to aligning objectives and incentives through alliance contracts, pain-and-gain mechanisms and collaborative frameworks. The intent is sound, but the Forum questions whether these tools can fully overcome the external motivators of partner organisations. Shareholders, boards, financial targets and competitive pressures do not disappear when a partnership begins.

At moments of pressure, the interests of the programme and the partner will diverge, and the external motivator is likely to prevail. Decision-making authority creates a further limit.



Third-party partners, however embedded, cannot hold the same decision rights as direct employees of the client. Contractual and fiduciary realities create a ceiling on delegated authority, producing governance that is more layered and slower-moving than it needs to be.

Insourcing the back office; outsourcing the mission

There is a counterintuitive pattern at the heart of many client organisations. The functions most often retained in-house are those of the corporate back office: finance, legal, communications and human resources administration. The functions most often outsourced are those of the core mission: programme integration and commercial leadership.

High-performing organisations in other sectors tend to do the reverse. They retain the capability central to their mission and outsource or automate supporting functions. When the capability that matters most to infrastructure organisations sits in partner organisations, the client becomes a buyer of outputs rather than a steward of capability.

Why the model persists, and whether it must

The federated model did not emerge by accident. It responds to real pressures: programmes are finite, capability needs change by phase, and planning uncertainty makes permanent recruitment difficult, particularly in a programme's infancy. Once consent is secured, partnering appears to offer the fastest route to mobilisation.

The Forum is nevertheless sceptical that these pressures justify the current model. Major programmes routinely run for decades, while corporates also adapt their workforces as circumstances change. The temporary nature of programmes is real, but its implications have been overstated.

Speed can also become a trap. Procuring a partner organisation after consent is often treated as evidence that an organisation is ready. Yet readiness requires sufficient maturity in both the programme's design and the organisation established to deliver it. Investing early to resolve scope, requirements and design, while building leadership, culture, capability, governance, technology and data, can reduce the much greater costs of rework and change later in delivery. Neither should be allowed to lag behind the other. Mobilising the supply chain before the client can direct it creates costs that surface later in slower decisions, weaker control and avoidable rework.



Capability should be treated as a strategic asset to be built, not a commodity to be procured.

A different model: building sustained capability

The Forum considers that client capability should be treated as a strategic asset to be built, not a commodity to be procured. During the earliest stages of a programme, before the supply chain is engaged, the client should establish its culture, align its leadership, define decision rights and design its technology, data and governance architecture.

This requires a different view of early momentum. Progress is too often measured through procurement, contracting and mobilisation while organisational development receives less attention. Allowing supply-chain structures to harden before the client has the coherence to direct them is not acceleration. Organisational maturity should be a condition of readiness in its own right.

The workforce must also contain a materially greater proportion of directly employed staff in core delivery functions, not only the back office. Decade-long programmes need people personally invested in their outcomes, and that investment cannot be contracted in through a partnering arrangement. People and organisational strategy must therefore come first: the programme should decide at the outset what kind of organisation it needs to be, how it will make decisions, innovate and manage performance, and then build the capability to deliver with pace, control and confidence.

Recommendations:

- Organisational development should be given greater priority during the early stages of a programme, before the supply chain is engaged. Programme readiness should encompass both design and organisational maturity. Clients should invest early in developing requirements and design alongside the leadership, culture, capability and technology required for delivery, testing both rigorously before major commitments are made.
- Programme organisations must increase the proportion of directly employed staff within core delivery functions, not just the back office, and treat this as a strategic investment, not an operational overhead.
- People and organisational strategy must be placed at the centre of programme design from the outset, with comparable rigour to that applied to technical design and commercial structuring.



02 Wired to innovate

THE CHALLENGE QUESTION

The infrastructure sector should be at the forefront of technological advancement, leading the way in the implementation of innovative data systems. However, it is often criticised for lagging behind and struggling to adopt new solutions. How can the sector shift its approach and culture to become a leader in innovative technology solutions and AI adoption?

Chris Scudamore Partner and UK Capital Projects & Infrastructure Leader, PwC

The paradox of potential

The case for technology in infrastructure is, on the surface, overwhelming. Artificial intelligence, digital twins, advanced analytics and automation have applications across the entire lifecycle. From planning and consenting through design, construction, operation and maintenance, the transformational abilities of technology appear obvious.

Yet adoption remains uneven and technology advances have not yet translated consistently into transformation at sector or business model level. Transformation does not necessarily mean replacing the fundamental engineering activities on which infrastructure depends. In many cases, the greatest opportunity lies in applying technology purposefully to improve how assets, people, information and resources are managed, driving productivity and better decision making around the physical work of infrastructure. The challenge is not simply to innovate more, but to create the conditions in which proven innovations can be adopted and scaled.

The fragmentation barrier

A fundamental structural barrier is fragmentation. A corporate can mandate a new enterprise system, data standard or tool across the organisation because it controls the technology estate and the people who use it. Implementation may be difficult, but it remains within the organisation's sphere of control.

A major programme operates differently. Its supply chain is multi-layered and composed of legally, commercially and technologically independent organisations. The client may directly control only a fraction of the ecosystem; the remainder sits within contractors, sub-contractors, consultants and suppliers, each with its own technology and data architecture and ecosystem.

This connects directly with our first question on client delivery organisations. A thin, federated client is also technologically constrained. Its leaders can mandate change only across the part of the ecosystem they control, leaving a patchwork of systems and standards beyond their reach. Fragmentation also frustrates investment: the organisation asked to bear the cost of a technology may not be the one that captures the benefit. Without a mechanism to redistribute value, the incentive to invest or adopt does not exist.

The commercial model problem

The commercial model creates an equally serious barrier. Much of the supply chain is paid for inputs, be it labour hours, materials and management time, rather than outcomes. Under this model, efficiency can be seen as a financial threat. A contractor that uses technology to reduce the effort required may not create value for itself; conversely it may reduce its revenue. The organisations closest to delivery, and best placed to trial new technologies, are therefore often incentivised to resist them.

Procurement compounds the problem. Clients specify tightly to compare bids and manage risk, but the tighter the specification, the less latitude bidders have to propose a fundamentally different approach. The sector has built a system optimised for comparing solutions to a problem it has already defined, the consequence of which is a constraint to innovation. In a sector with a reputation for risk avoidance and technological hesitation, innovation becomes the riskier proposition.

The culture of risk aversion

Infrastructure professionals are not temperamentally averse to innovation, but they operate in environments that make caution rational.

Public programmes face intense scrutiny of cost and compliance. The person who backs a new technology and sees it fail is accountable in a way that the person who declines to invest and delivers inefficiently is not. Spending to save is accepted in principle but difficult in practice. Under these conditions, risk aversion is not a personality failing; it is a career-rational response to the incentive structure.

Other sectors treat research and development as a protected operating cost. Infrastructure rarely does. AI adds a specific difficulty: the data it needs is fragmented, inconsistently structured and distributed across organisational boundaries. Creating the unified, high-quality data environment on which AI depends requires not only technical integration, but commercial relationships that reward openness rather than information hoarding.





Creating conditions for transformation

The sector's technology problem will not be solved by enthusiasm, pilot projects or innovation competitions. These have their place, but cannot deliver the structural transformation required. Cultural, structural and commercial barriers must be addressed together.

Culturally, leaders must create an environment in which calculated risks can be taken, experimentation is not career-limiting and managed failure is treated as a source of learning rather than blame. This begins with the tone set by Government and executive teams, the questions they ask, the behaviours they reward and the decisions they protect when experiments do not succeed.

Structurally, a thin client with limited control over the people, systems and processes of its supply chain will struggle to drive transformation across the ecosystem. Greater direct capability and intentional organisational development are prerequisites for technology leadership. They also create innovation space before contracts and commercial structures narrow the available choices: time to determine technology standards, data architecture and the conditions required for innovation to scale.

Commercially, the sector must accept that genuine innovation may make procurement more complicated in the short term. Specifying outcomes rather than inputs gives the market greater latitude, but demands a direct confrontation with input-based pricing. Organisations closest to delivery must be able to benefit from the efficiency they create rather than being penalised for it.

The Infra-tech fund: necessary but not sufficient

Last year's Forum recommended pooling public and private innovation funding into an independent Infra-tech fund, combining Government capital with investment from contractors and engineering firms and taking equity positions in early-stage companies with the potential to transform delivery. That recommendation stands.

Project-by-project funding cannot generate the scale, pace or sustained impact required. Individual programmes struggle to amass sufficient investment, must seek returns within their own timescales and rarely capture a shared benefit when an innovation succeeds elsewhere. A pooled vehicle can address those limitations.



Fix the client organisation, its structure, culture, commercial relationships and people strategy, and the conditions for technology leadership follow.

Capital pooling, however, is necessary rather than sufficient. Money directed at fragmented, federated and commercially constrained organisations will not achieve its purpose; it will bounce off them. The fund needs capable recipients with the culture and commercial architecture to absorb investment and scale it. Early-stage equity investment can proceed, but programme-level deployment must be accompanied by organisational reform. A fund without a recipient is a wasted opportunity.

Innovation is not optional

Constrained public finances, inflationary pressure and an ageing asset base are widening the gap between what the country requires and what the current model can deliver.

One response is to let that gap crystallise, accepting consequences for growth, resilience and quality of life. The other is to innovate: to close the gap between ambition and affordability through step changes in productivity, efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Technology can do this, but only when it is properly adopted, embedded and supported.

The Forum's conclusion is therefore direct: the path to transformative technology adoption runs through organisational reform. Fix the client organisation, its structure, culture, commercial relationships and people strategy, and the conditions for technology leadership follow. Fail to fix it, and no amount of funding, AI ambition or digital strategy will deliver the transformation the sector and the country need.

Recommendations:

- Where appropriate, Government and industry should replace labour-based pricing and prescriptive procurement with outcome-based commercial models that share risk and reward those who deliver greater productivity through technology.
- Before engaging the supply chain, clients should establish their technology strategy, common data architecture and contractual requirements for open, interoperable data.
- The proposed Infra-tech fund should be launched, with investment conditional on the organisational and commercial reforms required to turn successful pilots into sector-wide adoption.



03 Maintenance matters

QUESTION 3

In the UK, our historic infrastructure underpins society. From Roman roads, Victorian railways and sewers to post-war housing and utilities, the economy rests on ageing assets. Yet debate focuses overwhelmingly on new projects rather than stewardship of what already exists. How can the UK better manage the renewal and upgrade of its current infrastructure, and articulate the need and value of maintaining and renewing existing assets?

Future Infrastructure Leaders Forum - 2026 Cohort

The infrastructure we do not see

Infrastructure maintenance suffers from a problem of visibility. New projects arrive with names, budgets, political sponsors and opening ceremonies. Maintenance arrives with possession notices, lane closures and expenditure noticed chiefly when it has not been made. Public and political debate is therefore skewed towards addition rather than preservation. It is pushed towards the asset that can be announced rather than the service that continues behind the scenes.

Much of the UK's prosperity depends not on infrastructure yet to be built, but on transport, water, energy and digital assets already in service. Stewardship is not a lesser form of infrastructure policy. Maintenance protects productive capacity, extends asset life and avoids the substantially higher economic and social cost of failure.

A risk landscape moving in three directions

Pressure on the existing estate is increasing along three axes. The first is age. Many networks contain Victorian or

post-war assets. Age alone does not determine failure, but deterioration is rarely linear: assets can appear stable for long periods before reliability declines rapidly. Waiting for visible distress is therefore a poor substitute for understanding condition.

The second is interdependence. Infrastructure no longer operates as a collection of discrete sectors. Power enables water treatment, transport signalling and data centres; digital systems control physical assets; transport disruption can prevent workers and supplies reaching every other network. A local weakness can therefore propagate into national disruption.

The third is threat. Climate change is exposing assets to conditions beyond their original design assumptions, cyber threats are widening the attack surface and demand is rising as tolerance for interruption falls. Resilience is not simply about maintaining old assets to old standards. It requires renewing them for a harsher, more connected and less predictable operating environment.



The politics of the counterfactual

Preventive investment is unusually hard to defend because success is invisible. Spend on a new asset and something tangible appears; spend after a failure and the connection between problem and response is clear. Spend before failure, however, and the principal outcome is that nothing happens. The outage does not occur and the service continues. The cost is visible; the benefit is a counterfactual.

This asymmetry can reward reaction over prevention. Decision-makers are held accountable for today's expenditure more readily than tomorrow's avoided disruption, creating a temptation to defer maintenance in favour of the nearest operational problem. Deferral does not remove cost. It converts planned intervention into emergency response, shortens asset life and passes a larger liability to the next funding period and the next generation.

From fix-on-fail to know-and-prevent

The Forum considers that a better approach begins with evidence. Across parts of the estate, asset registers are incomplete, condition data inconsistent and information fragmented between owners, operators and suppliers. Organisations may know what they spend, but not always what they own, how quickly it is degrading or which components create the greatest systemic risk. Without that foundation, maintenance becomes a contest between anecdotes, emergencies and institutional influence.

The Forum therefore calls for a national step-change in the science of failure. Infrastructure should adopt common asset-health standards, interoperable data, sensor-based monitoring and analytical models linking condition to service risk. The objective is not data accumulation for its own sake, but the ability to direct scarce capital to the interventions that protect the greatest value.



The sector must explain maintenance in terms people recognise: fewer outages, safer journeys, lower lifetime bills and infrastructure able to withstand shocks.

The weak customer signal

Better evidence must be matched by better accountability. In competitive markets, customers can punish unreliable providers by leaving. Most infrastructure services are not exposed to this same risk, so that signal is weak or absent.

A common language of value is therefore needed. Publishing the economic impact of failure or unavailability would make the hidden cost of underinvestment more visible and turn an abstract debate about maintenance budgets into a concrete conversation about the reliability citizens should expect and the price of providing it, or not.

Stewardship across the system

The UK's institutional architecture remains organised largely by sector and funding period, while risk travels across boundaries and generations. Water, energy, transport and digital operators assess assets under different standards, assumptions and regulatory cycles. This obscures single points of failure that can disrupt several systems, and opportunities to coordinate renewal more cheaply and with less disruption.

Government should establish a cross-sector view of critical asset health and interdependency, focused around place and beginning with the systems whose failure would have the widest consequences.

Making maintenance matter

None of this will endure without public legitimacy. The sector must explain maintenance in terms people recognise: fewer outages, safer journeys, lower lifetime bills and infrastructure able to withstand shocks. Ministers, regulators and operators need a shared narrative that makes the case before failure and presents renewal as the protection of national wealth.

Recommendations:

- Asset owners should adopt common, forward-looking measures of asset health, service resilience and systemic risk, supported by interoperable asset registers and condition data.
- Government, industry and research bodies should invest in the science of failure so that intervention is driven by risk rather than crisis.
- Operators should report clearly and consistently on asset condition, resilience outcomes and the long-term consequences of deferred renewal, creating a more informed public debate about cost, risk and service reliability.



04 Convene the place, not just the project

QUESTION 4

What are the obstacles to delivering genuinely integrated place-based projects and programmes to support local economic growth and new housing, and how could government decision-making and delivery structures be improved to address these?

Becky Wood Chief Executive Officer, National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA)

Beyond the map

Place-based infrastructure is not a new idea, but the term remains imprecise and risks becoming another buzzword. Every asset is built somewhere, and major schemes should benefit surrounding communities. Neither fact alone makes a project place-based.

The Forum understood place is more than geography or local impact: it is the combined economic, social and physical experience of those who live and work there. A genuinely place-based programme coordinates multiple investments, organisations and sectors around outcomes that no single project can deliver alone. Housing, for example, may depend on transport, utilities, skills and employment. The value lies in how these interventions work together.

The place nobody owns

The Forum's definition of place has an important implication. Places are experienced as a whole, but rarely planned, funded or delivered as one. The outcomes people value, including growth, housing, connectivity and quality of life, depend on the cumulative effect of many projects and institutions.

From the outside, responsibility for a place can appear coherent. In the simplest view, local authorities manage planning. Utilities maintain networks. Transport bodies provide strategic connectivity. Developers bring forward growth and development. Government departments pursue national priorities. The reality is more complicated than this. Each organisation performs multiple roles and influences outcomes in different ways. Yet the broader observation remains true: each has a legitimate role in shaping the future of a place, but none is responsible for the place as a whole when it comes to delivering integrated place-based outcomes.

This is the defining structural challenge of place-based delivery. Places do not conform to the organisational boundaries through which decisions are made and resources allocated. Strategic authorities can help bring institutions together, but they do not remove the need for coordination across fragmented responsibilities, incentives and funding.

The system does not prevent integration, and successful programmes show what is possible. The problem is that success too often depends on exceptional leadership and coordination rather than being the normal way of working.

Waiting for perfection

Faced with this complexity, the sector often reaches first for policy reform and institutional change. The assumption is understandable: if integrated outcomes are difficult, the system itself must require redesign. The Forum reached a different conclusion.

That is not an argument against continued reform. Processes and institutions should evolve, and strategic and sub-regional authorities have already made integration easier. Successful place-based projects can be delivered within the system that exists today. Another cycle of structural redesign should not distract from the pressing need to deliver schemes and growth. The greater risk is that searching for a perfect system diverts time and energy from making the present one work.

Common ground, different reasons

A common misconception is that place-based delivery requires every organisation to share the same objective. It does not. Public bodies, infrastructure owners, investors and developers approach a place with different societal, organisational and commercial priorities. These will rarely align perfectly.

The task is to create programmes offering enough value for different participants to support collective progress while pursuing their own objectives. Place-based delivery does not eliminate competing interests or impose a single purpose. Its strongest propositions create common ground rather than common purpose.

This makes convening critical. No organisation owns the place as a whole, but somebody must turn competing interests into a deliverable proposition. Strategic authorities are well placed to convene locally, drawing on democratic legitimacy, local knowledge and policy levers. NISTA should complement them nationally, bringing together the government departments, infrastructure owners, investors and delivery organisations needed to turn local ambition into delivery.

Before the starting line

Successful place-based programmes begin before any formal process does. The most important conversations take place before a business case is written, a planning application submitted or a funding package assembled. Once those mechanisms are engaged, positions harden, preferred options acquire momentum and the scope for genuine collaboration narrows.





This is where convening differs from consultation. Consultation asks organisations to respond to a proposal; convening asks them to help create it. Bringing authorities, developers, infrastructure owners, utilities, investors and communities together before formal structures exist is often treated as discretionary. It should be recognised as an early investment in delivery. Place-based delivery does not begin with a business case. It begins with a conversation.

Paying for the place

Place-based delivery often falters because the funding conversation starts too late. By the time projects are defined and expectations established, there may be little agreement on who benefits, who pays, who carries risk or which investment must come first. Questions belonging to the programme as a whole are instead considered project by project.

Successful programmes think less about funding individual schemes and more about funding the pathway required to deliver a set of outcomes. That means early agreement on what must be delivered, in what sequence, by whom and from which source of funding, alongside a frank discussion of who ultimately bears the cost. Financing can move money around a system; it does not remove the need to decide who pays for growth.

This may require a different risk appetite from public-sector anchor institutions and a more confident approach to commercial partnership. Public funding will remain important, but many programmes will depend on attracting private capital and finding an end user to pay. Not every proposition will succeed, nor should it. Some failure at the development stage is a necessary consequence of innovation and growth; the greater risk is never developing promising opportunities far enough to discover whether they can work.

The capability to deliver

Place-based programmes require clients able to assemble and direct a demanding mix of skills: commercial judgement, programme leadership, stakeholder management, funding, technical expertise and convening. Established infrastructure clients often possess these capabilities. Many newer institutions now expected to lead place-based programmes do not yet have them at sufficient depth.

“

Without experienced people to shape the proposition, test its logic and lead delivery, new powers and funding will achieve less than intended.

This matters because place-based projects are less likely to follow a familiar delivery playbook and often require more nuanced commercial and partnership arrangements. Strategic authorities and local delivery bodies have gained greater responsibility for growth, housing and infrastructure, but responsibility does not create capability. Without experienced people to shape the proposition, test its logic and lead delivery, new powers and funding will achieve less than intended.

Capability must therefore be built during programme development, not after delivery is under way. NISTA should help institutions identify gaps and provide targeted training, mentoring and access to experienced practitioners. The supply chain should support knowledge transfer, but must not become a substitute for a capable client. The objective is not a new class of place-making professional; it is to ensure that every organisation leading a place-based programme has the blend of skills required to succeed.

Recommendations:

- NISTA should establish a place-based delivery forum for major programmes, bringing together government, infrastructure owners, investors and industry to resolve cross-sector barriers, share lessons from successful schemes and accelerate the adoption of effective delivery models.
- Major place-based programmes should appoint named conveners and undertake an early capability review, supported by NISTA, to bring together key stakeholders before business case and planning processes constrain options, and to ensure the client has the commercial, programme, partnership and delivery capabilities required to succeed.
- Major place-based programmes should develop integrated funding and sequencing strategies at the outset, setting out how projects will be financed, who ultimately bears the cost of growth and how risk and value will be shared across stakeholders.



About the Future Infrastructure Leaders Forum

The Future Infrastructure Leaders Forum brings together a select group of future leaders from the UK's pre-eminent infrastructure organisations and aims to support the development of the next generation of infrastructure leaders.

Nominated by executives in their own organisations, they have collaborated over the past year to explore some of the key challenges facing the sector and to rethink how the infrastructure of the next decade could be delivered.



James Ball
Director of Water Distribution and IMRDS Alliance, Anglian Water



Jamie Bannister
Deputy MEH Alliance Director, Sizewell C



Chris Carr
Vice President, USA Infrastructure, Turner & Townsend



Ross Corser
Senior Associate, Energy & Infrastructure Planning, Pinsent Masons



Laura Doughty
Head of Strategy - Major Projects, Sellafield



Luke Hammond
Network Delivery Manager, United Utilities



Miah Hargreaves
Head of Cost Assurance Strategy, HS2



Toby Jefferson
Deputy Director of Infrastructure, Navy Command, Royal Navy



Greg McClymont
Head of Infrastructure Spatial Planning, NISTA



Brian McCoubrey
Asset Development Director - East Midlands Airport, Manchester Airport Group



Calum McDougall
Portfolio Director, Reactor Operations, AtkinsRéalis



Rachael Meyer
Director, Capital Projects and Transformation Leadership, PwC



Neesha Pandya
Head of Low Carbon Delivery, Lower Thames Crossing



Paul Quinn
Deputy Head Commercial - Maritime, DIO



Sam Reed
Senior Project Manager, Skanska



Chris Regan
Regional Director - South West Operations, National Highways



Clare Slading
Strategy & Business Performance Director, Sizewell C



Carl Sobolewski
Regional Managing Director for Northern Region, Barratt Redrow



Nancy Thomson
Project Director (LTS Futures), SGN



Brian Wyn Paynter MBE
Project Director, Network Rail



About PwC

We help solve our clients' most important problems. Creating and protecting value, now and in the future.

Our four lines of service - Audit, Consulting, Deals, and Tax - bring together a wide range of capabilities. Technology and trust are at the centre of everything we do. Whether that's investing in high-quality audits or in skills so you can transform, mitigate risk and manage costs, navigate compliance or sustainability, shape your workforce, or find value in a deal or crisis.

We recognise the growing role of our regional footprint in supporting our clients and communities. With over 20,000 people across the UK and a global network of over 370,000 in 149 countries, we bring the skills and deep sector expertise you need to work alongside you.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the Forum's supporters, who have generously donated their time to support the work of the Forum over the course of the year.



Chris Ball
President UK and Ireland, AtkinsRéalis



Louise Beardmore
Chief Executive Officer, United Utilities



Vice Admiral Paul Beattie CBE
Second Sea Lord and Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, Royal Navy



Claire Benham
Commercial Director, Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO)



Nigel Cann
Chief Executive Officer, Sizewell C



Katy Dowding
President and Chief Executive Officer, Skanska



Katharina Ferguson
Sustainability and Supply Chain Director, Lower Thames Crossing



Nick Harris
Chief Executive Officer of National Highways (Former)



Simon Kirby
Special Advisor and member of the Advisory Council, PwC



Rt. Hon Alan Milburn
Former Member of Parliament and Senior Advisor, PwC



Patricia Moore
UK Managing Director, Turner & Townsend



Terry Muckian
Executive Vice President, Skanska



Devin-Paul O'Brien
Chief of Staff, SGN



Ken O'Toole
Group Chief Executive, Manchester Airport Group



Robbie Owen
Partner and Head of Infrastructure Planning and Government Affairs, Pinsent Masons



Julia Prescott CBE
Chair of NISTA Council of Expert Advisors, NISTA



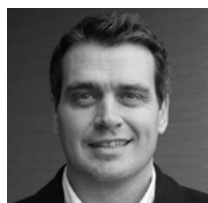
Mike Reader
Member of Parliament for Northampton North, Parliament



Jacqui Rock
Chief Commercial Advisor, HS2



Mike Scott
Chief Financial Officer (Former), Barratt Redrow



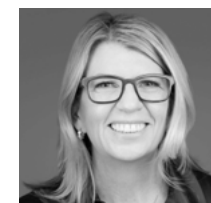
Chris Scudamore
Partner and UK Capital Projects & Infrastructure Leader, PwC



Andy Sharples
Major Projects Delivery Director, Sellafield



Elliot Shaw
Chief Customer and Strategy Officer, National Highways



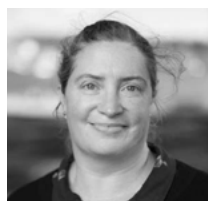
Morag Stuart
Chief Operating Officer, HS2



Mark Thurston
Chief Executive Officer, Anglian Water



Mark Wild OBE
Chief Executive Officer, High Speed Two (HS2)



Becky Wood
Chief Executive Officer, NISTA



PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP is a limited liability partnership registered in England with registered number OC303525. The registered office of PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP is 1 Embankment Place, London WC2N 6RH. PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority for designated investment business and the Solicitors Regulation Authority for the provision of regulated legal services.

This publication has been prepared for general guidance on matters of interest only, and does not constitute professional advice. You should not act upon the information contained in this publication without obtaining specific professional advice. No representation or warranty (express or implied) is given as to the accuracy or completeness of the information contained in this publication, and, to the extent permitted by law, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, its members, employees and agents do not accept or assume any liability, responsibility or duty of care for any consequences of you or anyone else acting, or refraining to act, in reliance on the information contained in this publication or for any decision based on it.

© 2026 PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP. All rights reserved. 'PwC' refers to the UK member firm, and may sometimes refer to the PwC network. Each member firm is a separate legal entity. Please see www.pwc.com/structure for further details.