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AIPM™ Position Statement On:
The APS Complex Project Management Profession Strategy

"Complexity Is Not a Profession, It Is a Core Element of Project Management"

Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM™)

Introduction

In November 2025, the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) released the *APS Complex Project Management Profession Strategy* (the Strategy), positioning the newly created "Complex Project Management (CPM) Profession" as a response to rising policy complexity, geopolitical volatility, enhanced public scrutiny, expanding ethical expectations, and accelerating technological change. The Strategy identifies these challenges as drivers for strengthening APS capability in navigating complexity across projects, policy, and service delivery.

These drivers are real. They reflect a challenging operating environment and underscore the need for improved planning, governance, leadership, and delivery performance across the APS. Yet the Strategy's framing of complexity as justification for a separate profession raises foundational questions. Complexity is not a distinct category of work within project delivery, nor is it unique to government environments. It is a central characteristic of **all** modern project management.

Complexity Is Not a Profession, It Is a Core Element of Project Management

Complexity has always been intertwined with project management. Whether delivering large-scale infrastructure, digital transformation, defence capability, regulatory reform, social programs, or policy implementation, project professionals operate within complex systems. These systems involve interdependencies across stakeholders, resources, time constraints, decision authorities, political contexts, procurement pathways, and risk environments.

The Strategy illustrates this with a model placing project management at the centre of an ecosystem, surrounded by governance, risk management, strategic planning, procurement and contracting, stakeholder management, evaluation, and change management. An outer layer represents the environmental attributes that make projects complex: uncertainty, ambiguity, volatility, nonlinearity, interdependence, connectivity, and emergence. Complexity emerges from the interaction of these factors and shapes the environment in which projects are delivered.

Complexity does not sit outside the project management profession; rather, it is an attribute of the environment that project managers must navigate using tailored and context-specific approaches. Success in complex projects goes beyond traditional metrics such as budget, schedule, and quality. It requires adaptive methods, innovation, strong partnerships, iterative learning, and the ability to deliver outcomes aligned with broader public expectations. Even the most robust methodology must be modified to suit the context. Otherwise, project success is not assured.

To imply that complexity warrants a *separate profession* risks misunderstanding this fundamental reality. Project management inherently requires mastery of complexity across the full suite of recognised knowledge domains, including:

- integration and coordination
- scope and requirements
- schedule and sequencing
- financial and cost control
- quality assurance
- human and resource capability
- risk and uncertainty
- procurement and contracting
- communications and stakeholder engagement
- governance and leadership

These dimensions apply equally in the private and public sectors. Procurement and contracting, for example—areas frequently highlighted in APS delivery reviews—are core components of project management everywhere, not auxiliary corporate functions.

The Strategy Correctly Identifies APS Challenges, but Frames Complexity Too Narrowly

The Strategy accurately references recurring themes from ANAO audits, Royal Commissions, and government reviews: failures in policy and program implementation, governance and risk management, and performance measurement. These challenges warrant serious investment in capability uplift.

However, the Strategy adopts a **narrow, APS-specific conceptualisation of complexity**, implying that the complexity experienced within government is structurally distinct from the complex environments faced by project professionals across all other sectors. This creates a tension within the Strategy: while it calls for a systems-based approach to complexity, it simultaneously isolates APS complexity as a distinct domain requiring its own separate profession.

Moreover, the Strategy:

- does not clearly define "project management"
- does not define "complexity" in a way consistent with established professional practice.
- assumes a separate professional identity is required, rather than capability uplift within the existing project profession.

These omissions leave the Strategy conceptually incomplete and risk inadvertently fragmenting APS capability development.

Capability Uplift Is Critical, But It Should Sit Within the Project Management Profession

A close reading of the Strategy's four themes and 14 initiatives shows an intention to build capability, establish shared language, enhance maturity, create stronger networks, and promote consistent practices. These are positive aspirations. Initiatives such as establishing

a CPM lexicon, creating toolkits, encouraging coaching and mentoring, and building a workforce plan all point to the need for coordinated uplift.

These objectives, however, do not require a separate profession.

They require **strengthening the project management profession within the APS**, improving alignment, and elevating skills system-wide.

Complexity capability is built through:

- systems thinking
- adaptive and iterative delivery
- integrated risk management
- strong governance structures
- evidence-based decision-making
- robust procurement and commercial management
- cross-agency collaboration
- ethical and values-driven leadership

These are the hallmarks of mature project management, not of a separate, parallel profession.

AIPM's Essential Role in National Professional Standards

The Strategy's Theme 2 correctly emphasises the need to adopt "industry-recognised standards supported by peak bodies." As the national peak body for the project profession, the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM™) should be a central partner in shaping such standards.

The absence of independent engagement with key professional bodies, including AIPM™, represents a missed opportunity to ensure coherence between APS capability development and the recognised national professional framework.

AIPM's involvement would strengthen:

- alignment of APS pathways with established professional standards
- credible and consistent certification, accreditation, and capability pathways
- national coherence across government, industry, and academia
- integration of complex delivery skills across all domains of project management
- avoidance of fragmentation or duplication

A more collaborative approach would support the Strategy's own stated aims of connectedness, shared language, and professional maturity.

Driving Project Management Excellence

A Universal Truth: Complexity Belongs at the Centre of Project Management

Complexity does not justify the creation of a separate profession. Instead, it highlights the need for deeper capability and stronger professional foundations within the existing discipline of project management.

The Strategy's intent, which is to improve delivery outcomes for government and the public, is valid and important. But the goal is best achieved by **uplifting the capability of the APS project management workforce**, not by dividing it.

Complexity is not an optional extra.
It is not a specialisation reserved for some.
It is not an isolated category of practice.
Complexity is the defining characteristic of modern project management.

Project management is, and must remain, the unifying profession that integrates strategy, governance, risk, delivery, assurance, and learning. Complexity is the landscape in which this profession operates. It is not a destination, a role, or a badge. It is the real-world condition that makes project management essential.

And the APS will be strongest when its approach to complexity is integrated, connected, and aligned with the broader project management profession, rather than separated from it.