NEW ZEALAND
INFRASTRUCTURE
COMMISSION
Te Waihanga

People Build Projects

The voices of NZ public sector infrastructure leaders

New Zealand Infrastructure Commission / Te Waihanga

Te Waihanga seeks to transform infrastructure for all New Zealanders. By doing so our goal is to lift the economic performance of Aotearoa and improve the wellbeing of all New Zealanders.

We are an autonomous Crown entity, listed under the Crown Entities Act 2004, with an independent board. We were established by the New Zealand Infrastructure Commission/Te Waihanga Act 2019 on 25 September 2019.

Information on the Commission is available at www.tewaihanga.govt.nz/

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People build projects. If we want better projects, we must invest in the people who lead them.

Senior Public Service Leader

Executive summary

Successful infrastructure delivery depends on people: the people who plan, design, cost, build, and lead projects through complexity. This report was undertaken by Te Waihanga to understand what it takes to lead public sector infrastructure well in New Zealand, and what gets in the way.

This report explores how leadership capability in New Zealand's public sector infrastructure system affects delivery performance, and what can be done to strengthen it. It draws on the experiences of senior leaders to identify system strengths, gaps, and practical opportunities for improvement.

What leaders told us

Leaders described their work as purposeful but demanding. They expressed pride in delivering meaningful assets, while navigating constant scrutiny, political changes, and complex stakeholder relationships. A consistent theme was high accountability with limited authority, leaders are responsible for outcomes but often lack control over key levers. They described systems that can slow delivery through duplication, unclear decision rights, and compliance-focused governance.

System barriers undermining performance

Leaders' feedback clustered into seven recurring barriers:

1. Appointment practices and remuneration constraints
2. Undefined roles and inconsistent expectations
3. Reliance on outsourced capability rather than building it
4. Unrealistic investment settings
5. Governance that constrains rather than enables
6. Political churn that disrupts continuity
7. A system built for approval rather than delivery

Capability gaps that constrain leaders

1. Project governance
2. Leading with influence
3. Public sector leadership
4. Business case management
5. People leadership
6. Commercial and budget management
7. Delivery literacy

What would improve performance

Leaders identified three priority areas for improvement:

1. Strengthen the talent system – Appoint and reward leaders' roles on capability, with clear expectations, recognised professional standards, and stronger pathways and mobility.
2. Enable better decisions and delivery – Simplify and strengthen governance and assurance.
3. Invest in capability and learning – Treat leadership development as a core input to delivery.

Executive summary

From evidence to action

The findings directly support the intent of National Infrastructure Plan Recommendation 16, strengthening public sector project leadership through a consistent, system-wide approach.

1. Establish a professional standard for public sector infrastructure leadership.
2. Design a cross-agency talent management framework for recruitment, development, and mobility.
3. Specify and fund leadership development as a core input to project delivery.

Bottom line

New Zealand does not lack committed infrastructure leaders. The evidence shows a system that makes effective leadership harder than it needs to be, with misalignment between accountability, authority, continuity, and support. Improving infrastructure performance and confidence requires treating leadership as a core system asset – deliberately appointed, supported, developed, and deployed where delivery risk is highest, and accompanied by clear expectations and transparent performance accountability.

Methodology

The findings are grounded in the direct experiences of public sector infrastructure leaders, particularly Senior Responsible Owners (SROs), Programme Directors (ProgDs), and Project Directors (PDs). Between 2022 and 2025, Te Waihanga engaged more than 250 leaders through interviews, workshops, and peer forums, complemented by a voluntary system-wide survey in October 2025 with over 150 respondents. The evidence is consistent across qualitative and survey insights and is supported by international literature referenced in the report.

Introduction: Why this matters

Successful infrastructure delivery depends on people – the people who plan, design, cost, build and deliver it.

Every investment, from regional hospitals to major transport corridors, depends on the capability of the leaders and teams responsible for delivering it. Te Waihanga, New Zealand Infrastructure Commission, undertook this work to better understand what it takes to lead well, what gets in the way, and how leadership capability can be more deliberately strengthened and held to account across the system.

The report is grounded in the voices of those at the centre of public sector infrastructure delivery, the Senior Responsible Owners (SROs), Programme Directors (ProgDs) and Project Directors (PDs) accountable for many of our country's most complex and visible projects. They carry the weight of public expectation and the responsibility for turning strategy into results, often operating within settings where authority, support, and accountability are not always well aligned.

Introduction: Why this matters

Over the past three years, we have listened to hundreds of public sector infrastructure leaders through interviews, forums, workshops, networking events, and a system-wide survey. Their reflections have been frank, insightful, and consistent. They describe the satisfaction of leading projects that make a difference, alongside the frustration of working within systems that can slow decisions, blur accountability, and erode goodwill. Many spoke of the reward in seeing an idea become reality, the constant pressure of public scrutiny, and the personal toll of carrying responsibility without corresponding authority. They also reflected on the need for clearer expectations of leadership judgement, earlier escalation of risk, and more consistent performance feedback.

We have listened closely because leadership capability is an important determinant of whether infrastructure investments deliver lasting value for New Zealanders, and it is a responsibility the public sector cannot outsource to the private sector.

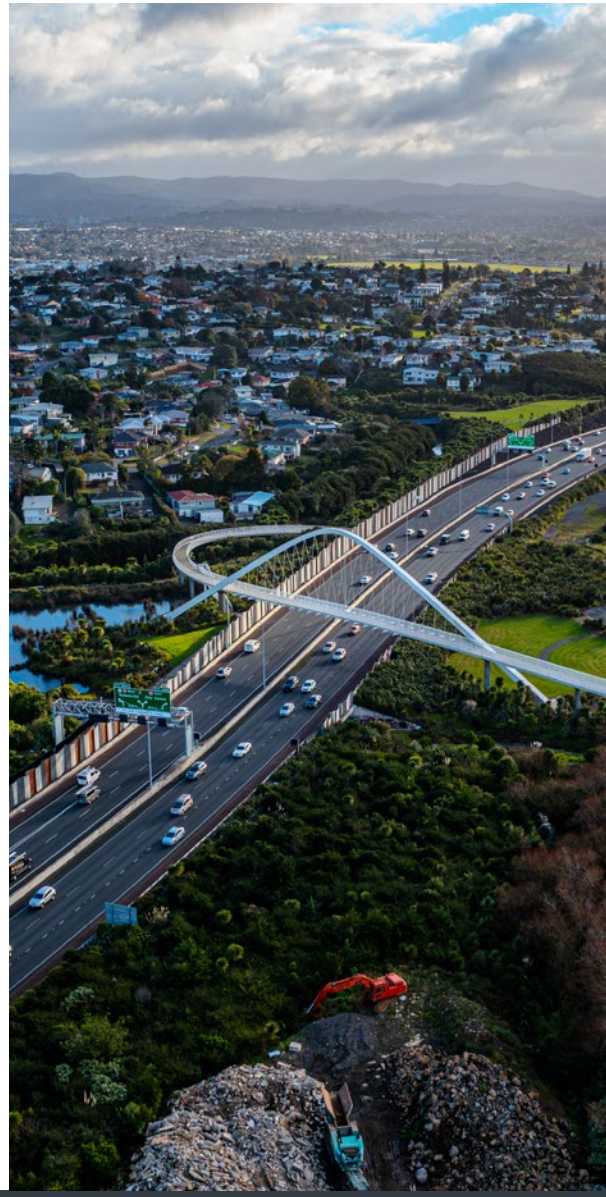
To be a confident and capable client of infrastructure, central and local government need leaders who can navigate complexity, balance policy and project delivery, and build the trusted relationships that underpin success. It also requires leadership roles to be deliberately appointed, supported, tested, and subject to transparent and proportionate accountability for delivery outcomes.

New Zealand faces a significant infrastructure task. The National Infrastructure Pipeline identifies more than $215 billion of projects planned or underway across central and local government (as at December 2025 - note the total Pipeline value was $268 billion).

Despite strong intent, infrastructure projects in New Zealand continue to face delays, budget overruns, and capability constraints. These challenges reduce the value delivered to the communities who rely on infrastructure every day. Strengthening the capability of the public sector leaders responsible for governing and delivering these projects is one of the most practical ways to improve delivery performance and ensure infrastructure spending delivers lasting benefit.

This report reflects the lived experience of public sector infrastructure leaders. It brings together what leaders told us, supported by data and international evidence, to show where capability is working well, where it is stretched, and what could be changed to improve system performance. While many barriers are structural, the report also recognises that leadership behaviours, assumptions, and decision-making practices influence outcomes, and must be part of the improvement agenda.

The views and experiences described are those of participating leaders and do not necessarily reflect the views, positions, or policies of Te Waihanga, or the organisations the leaders represent. The analysis is intended to support system-level learning and improvement, not to assess individual performance or agency practice, but to strengthen collective capability, clarity of expectations, and accountability across the infrastructure system.



Key findings - how this report is structured

Leadership capability matters

Defining NZ public sector infrastructure leaders

Leadership survey insights

The lived reality of public sector infrastructure leadership

System barriers that undermine performance

Capability gaps that constrain leaders

What would improve performance

From evidence to action: public sector project leadership

Conclusion

Leadership capability matters

"Projects fail less because of technical difficulty, and more because of human, leadership and organisational factors."

Leadership capability is a strong determinant of success in public sector infrastructure projects. These projects are large, politically visible, and inherently complex, often involving multiple agencies, suppliers, iwi, and communities. The evidence shows that projects fail less because of technical difficulty, and more because of human, leadership and organisational factors.

As the OECD (2020) states:

"Good governance of infrastructure not only promotes value for money and affordability but also helps to make the right projects happen in a manner that is trusted by users and citizens."

Capability is therefore not just a matter of efficiency; it underpins public confidence and trust in how infrastructure is planned and delivered.

International research reinforces this point. (Denicol et al., 2020), drawing on evidence from more than 6,000 projects across multiple studies, concluded that:

"the quality of leadership and governance is the most important determinant of megaproject performance".

Where leadership capability is strong, projects are clearer, decisions are faster, and value for money improves. Where it is weak, costs rise, timelines slip, and confidence erodes, both within government and with the public.

The international evidence is consistent

Projects often fail because of human, leadership and organisational factors

Good governance of infrastructure not only promotes value for money and affordability, but also helps to make the right projects happen in a manner that is trusted by users and citizens.

OECD (2020)

Adaptability, flexibility, and the design of the roles and responsibilities ... are critical ingredients of programme management.

Denicol et al. (2022)

Weaknesses in leadership and oversight remain common causes of failure.

Davies (2020)

Nine out of ten megaprojects go over budget or over time due to predictable human errors, not random mistakes.

Flyvbjerg, B (2014)

Effective project delivery depends not only on process but on the quality of leadership and decision-making guiding it.

Ellis et al. (2017)

Organisations continue to undervalue the importance of people skills in project leadership.

Project Management Institute (2025)

Megaproject success depends far more on organisational capability than on technical challenges.

Merrow (2011)

Only a quarter of major construction projects were delivered successfully, with poor decision-making, behaviors, and leadership among the most significant underlying causes of failure.

Armstrong (2015)

Most project overruns stem from avoidable human errors in decision-making, particularly optimism bias and political bias.

Garemo et al. (2015)

The biggest problems in megaprojects are not technical; they are human. Bent Flyvbjerg,

Flyvbjerg & Gardner (2023)

What New Zealand evidence shows

Poor project governance has been identified as a significant and growing concern in New Zealand.

Transmission Gully Independent Post-Construction Review (2024)

...agencies' capability ... was generally limited and lacking across the sector, and that knowledge, level of experience, capability, and behaviours ... has a significant impact on project outcomes.

Towards better contracts (2023)

Support for the SRO by way of technical leadership and management of the stakeholders is lacking, resulting in an overloaded SRO and potentially inefficient project progression.

Mental Health Infrastructure Programme Review (2022)

At the heart of every megaproject is the ability to bring people together.

Insights for Major Project Delivery (2025)

Governance structures were not well-equipped to manage the complexity of a megaproject.

City Rail Link Phase 1 – Preliminary Lessons Learnt Findings (2023)

Changes in key roles, including Senior Responsible Owner, have contributed to project uncertainty.

New Dunedin Hospital Independent Expert Readiness Review (2024)

Successful delivery of major projects depends on the interconnections between decision-making, governance, leadership, risk management, and stakeholder engagement.

Insights for Major Project Delivery (2025)

Projects succeed when leaders actively invest in relationships.

Insights for Major Project Delivery (2025)

Public entities often underestimate the level of leadership, capability, and discipline required to manage large and complex investments.

Office of the Auditor-General (2023)

Capability at the coalface is stretched. Many agencies are thought lacking in the skills and experience required to effectively manage even business as usual procurements.

Infrastructure New Zealand (2018)

Defining NZ public sector infrastructure leaders

"You're accountable to Ministers, CEs, Treasury, communities and the media. Everyone expects certainty in an environment that's anything but."

This report draws directly on the voices of more than 250 public sector infrastructure leaders engaged by Te Waihanga between 2022 and 2025 through interviews, national workshops, peer-learning forums, masterclasses, and a system infrastructure leaders survey conducted in October 2025.

Survey participants included Senior Responsible Owners Programme Directors, Project Directors, Asset Managers, and senior executives from New Zealand's central and local government, Crown entities, and council-controlled organisations. Their collective experience spans projects worth billions of dollars across sectors including transport, health, education, housing, and water.

The qualitative insights and quotes presented in this report come from workshops, interviews, and peer forums with SROs and PDs, complemented by the survey, which broadened the picture to include ProgDs as a distinct cohort for the first time.

Across these engagements, leaders described the realities of leading complex, politically visible projects, the weight of accountability, the limits of authority, and the importance of trust and connection. They spoke candidly about what enables success: clear mandates, proportionate governance, early planning time, and supportive peer networks.

It's not the frameworks that make the difference, it's the people, the relationships, and the courage to lead.

Throughout this report:

- Direct quotes from leaders appear in speech bubbles, quotation marks, or are italicised to preserve their authentic voice.
- Quantitative survey data is woven through each section to illustrate patterns across roles and agencies.
- All participant comments are anonymised to protect confidentiality.

Together, these perspectives provide a system-wide view of what it takes to lead infrastructure in the public sector, and what must change to help leaders succeed.

Defining NZ public sector infrastructure leaders

Defining the roles

New Zealand's public sector infrastructure leaders occupy some of the most demanding roles in government. They carry responsibility for investments ranging from regional water upgrades to multi-billion-dollar transport and health programmes.

There is limited consistency in job titles and roles across the public sector. Project Directors (PDs), for example, may operate across both the investment phase (strategic assessment and business case development) and the delivery phase (procurement and implementation) of infrastructure projects. These stages require different capabilities, although the same title is commonly used.

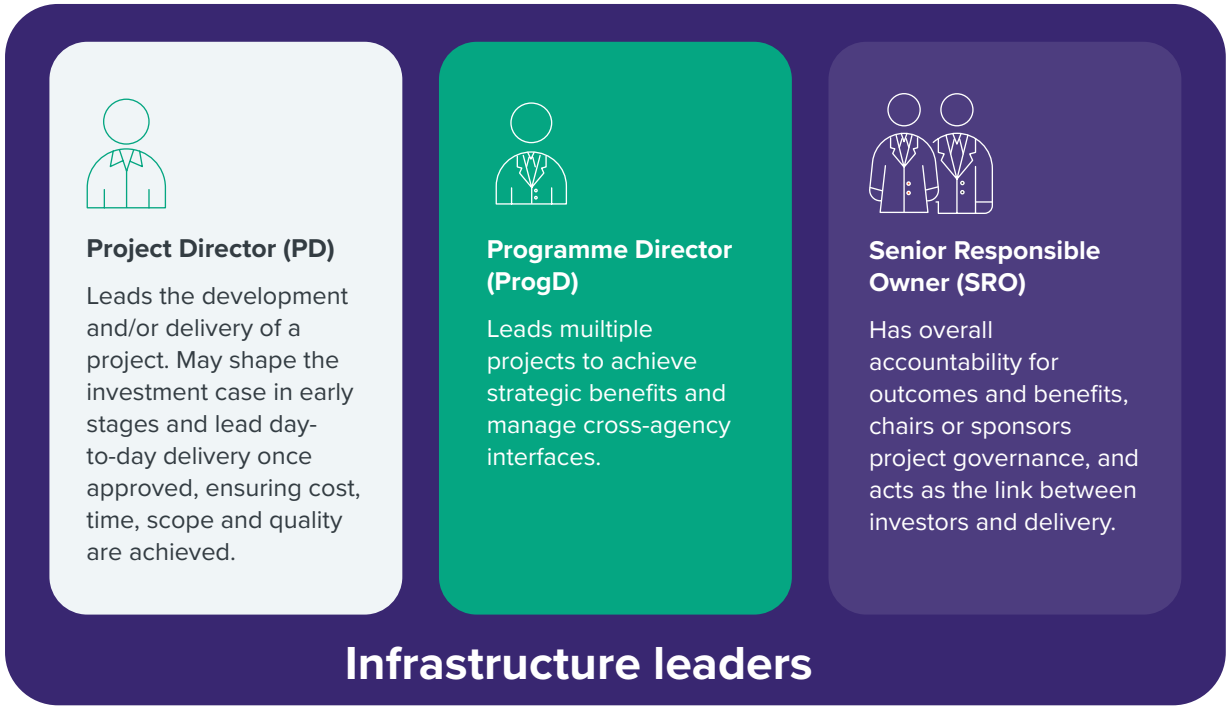
The role of Programme Director (ProgD) is also used inconsistently. In some agencies and entities it functions as a governance role, while in others it reflects the more typical definition of a ProgD responsible for overseeing multiple related projects.

While Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) is a standard term within central government, across local government the function may also be referred to as Project Executive, Project Sponsor, or other equivalent titles. For ease, this report uses the term SRO.

Figure 1 defines how these roles are used in this report.

Together, these roles form the leadership that guides infrastructure investments from early investment decisions through to delivery and benefits realisation.

Figure 1: Defining Infrastructure Leaders



Leadership survey insights

"We know the frameworks, what we need now is the confidence and judgement to lead through complexity."

In October 2025, a voluntary survey of senior public sector infrastructure leaders was conducted. The survey was open to senior leaders involved in infrastructure delivery across the public sector and sought to capture insights on roles, experience, development needs, and system-level challenges.

Completed the survey

140+ infrastructure leaders

40 SROs

43 ProgDs

24 PDs

Nearly half of survey respondents

48% central government agencies

with over a quarter

27% Crown entities

The remainder were from local government or state-owned enterprises.

The results provide insight into trends across leadership roles in New Zealand's public sector infrastructure system. However, the total size of the leadership population is unknown, and results should be interpreted as indicative rather than absolute representative.

The survey results are consistent with what we have heard through interviews, workshops, and earlier Te Waihanga engagement.

Demographic	SRO	ProgD	PD
Typical portfolio	Oversees multiple large programmes and benefits delivery across agencies	Leads multiple related projects to deliver strategic outcomes	Manages day-to-day delivery of one major project
Typical number of current projects	> 10	> 10	1–5
Experience in current type of role	Most frequently 1–3 yrs (33%)	Most frequently 4–6 yrs (44%)	Most frequently < 1 yr (29%)
Expected time in current role	Most frequently 2–5 yrs (35%)	Most frequently 5+ yrs (28%)	Most frequently 2–5 yrs (50%)
Employment type	Permanent full-time (90%)	Permanent full-time (79%)	Permanent full-time (92%)
Remuneration	Most frequently $200-$250k (31%) and > $300k (34%)	Most frequently $150–$200k (43%) and $200-$250k (29%)	Most frequently $150–$250k (64%)
Age profile	Most frequently aged 55+ (48%)	Most frequently aged 45–54 (47%)	Most frequently aged 45–54 (37%)
Gender split	69% male	72% male	79% male
Ethnicity	60% European 3% Māori 10% other	67% European 9% Māori 7% other	71% European 13% Māori 8% other
Sector experience	53% public sector	56% public sector	54% public sector

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to multiple responses and rounding

Source: 'Public Sector Infrastructure Leadership Survey – Technical Appendix'. Te Waihanga. (2026).

Leadership survey insights

Diversity is limited in the leadership cohort

Women made up around 30% of survey respondents (n≈87), compared with 61% across the public service and 16% across the wider construction and infrastructure workforce.

Māori respondents represent approximately 3 – 8% across leadership roles in the survey sample, compared with 16% Māori and 10% Pacific peoples across the wider public service.

Public sector infrastructure leadership therefore reflects neither the public service population nor the construction and infrastructure workforce.

So what?

When leadership looks and thinks too much the same, important viewpoints can be missed. This puts more pressure on a small group of leaders and makes the system less resilient over time.

Infrastructure leaders are older, with limited renewal at senior levels

Leadership levels are dominated by a mature cohort. Around 69% of respondents (n≈86) are aged 45 and over, with only 7% under 35. SROs are the oldest group, with around 70% aged 55 or above.

This reflects deep experience but also limited renewal into senior infrastructure roles. The small number of younger leaders points to a thin succession pipeline, increasing future reliance on a narrow, late-career group to carry system-critical delivery risk.

So what?

When most leaders are older, experience is concentrated in a smaller group. Without bringing through and developing new leaders, there's a risk that knowledge isn't passed on well, leading to gaps in delivery over time.

Employment type is predominantly permanent full-time

Approximately nine in ten infrastructure leadership roles are permanent full-time, with very few fixed-term, secondment, or contractor appointments. The system relies heavily on permanence to provide continuity.

This suggests agencies are making limited use of tools such as secondments, fixed-term roles, or targeted external appointments to bring in specialist expertise, support leadership development, or enable movement across the system.

So what?

Stability within agencies does not translate into mobility across the system. When leaders remain in the same organisation for long periods, experience and lessons are not easily shared between projects or agencies.

Remuneration varies by role and is perceived to lag compared to the private sector

PDs and ProgDs in the public sector typically earn between $150,000 and $250,000, while over half of SROs are paid above $250,000. Despite this, only around 25% of ProgDs report being satisfied that their pay reflects the level of accountability they carry.

Overall, remuneration is widely perceived by leaders as not keeping pace with the responsibility, complexity, and risk associated with senior infrastructure roles.

So what?

When pay is seen as misaligned with accountability, it becomes harder to attract, retain, and motivate experienced leaders, increasing pressure on those already in the system.

Tenure length provides stability but could limit mobility

Most leaders remain in their current roles for one to six years, providing continuity through delivery cycles. However, this also points to limited movement across agencies, programmes, or project phases, which can reduce opportunities for shared learning.

Around 55 – 60% of respondents have spent five or more years in their current organisation, while fewer than 20% joined within the last two years. This suggests organisational stability, but low inflow of new perspectives and limited cross-system mobility.

So what?

When leaders stay in one place for long periods, experience is not easily shared, and lessons are harder to spread across the system.

Leadership survey insights

Leaders are managing exceptionally high workloads across multiple projects

Leaders reported managing exceptionally high workloads across multiple projects.

SROs often oversee more than ten active projects, frequently across different asset types and alongside another substantive role. ProgDs also manage large portfolios, typically overseeing many smaller projects at the same time. PDs tend to manage fewer projects, but these are often very large and complex, with values well over $250 million.

Across all roles, leaders are carrying heavy and sustained workloads. Each tier faces a different pressure: SROs manage wide and fragmented accountability, ProgDs balance volume and coordination, and PDs carry deep delivery pressure on a small number of major assets.

So what?

When workloads are this high, leaders have less time for strategic thinking, learning, and supporting others. Over time, this stretches capacity, increases burnout risk, and raises the chance of delivery problems.

Primarily public sector experience

Around 65% of infrastructure leaders report spending most of their careers in the public sector, while about 30% have worked across both the public and private sectors. Very few leaders report exclusively private sector backgrounds, and where private sector experience exists, it is often limited to earlier or shorter phases of their careers.

This pattern is consistent across PDs, ProgDs and SROs, indicating that broader cross-sector experience does not increase with seniority.

So what?

When experience is drawn mainly from the public sector, the system is less likely to benefit from different ways of managing risk, contracts, and delivery. Over time, this limits learning and reduces the system's ability to adapt.

Professional backgrounds shift from technical to managerial with seniority

PDs predominantly come from construction and delivery disciplines, ProgDs from engineering and programme management, and SROs from policy, management, and governance. The pattern shows that technical and delivery depth decreases as roles become more senior, while policy and organisational experience dominate at the top. This strengthens strategic alignment but can weaken commercial and delivery literacy at the points where government must act as an informed client.

So what?

At more senior levels, leaders often have less hands-on delivery and commercial experience. While strong in strategy and policy, this can make it harder to challenge decisions, manage risk, or act as an informed client, which may lead to greater reliance on advisors and weaker oversight of delivery.

Qualifications are widespread but not standardised

Survey evidence shows that most infrastructure leaders hold at least one formal qualification, but these differ markedly by role and are not standardised. PDs and ProgDs most commonly report technical or professional qualifications, such as engineering, construction, or quantity surveying, often complemented by postgraduate study or MBAs as seniority increases. SROs are more likely to hold general management, policy, or governance qualifications. No single qualification is held by a majority of leaders across roles, indicating that qualifications reflect individual career pathways rather than a common preparation for public sector infrastructure leadership.

So what?

Wide variation in qualifications makes it difficult to identify the right people for leadership roles and undermines confidence that leaders are consistently prepared. Without clearer and more consistent signals of capability, qualifications alone don't reliably show whether someone is ready to lead complex infrastructure projects.

No common certifications or accreditations

PDs and ProgDs often hold project management certifications, but these are unevenly distributed and not universal. SROs are less likely to hold delivery-specific certifications. The survey shows that no certification, accreditation, or verification framework is held by a majority of leaders or operates as a shared standard across roles.

So what?

In the absence of a common certification or accreditation framework, assurance of leadership capability remains implicit and inconsistent, limiting the system's ability to deliberately assess, develop, and deploy leaders with the judgement required for high-risk, high-value infrastructure delivery.

The lived reality of public sector infrastructure leadership

Leading a major public project in New Zealand can be exhilarating and exhausting and the survey data helps explain why. Many respondents are highly experienced leaders responsible for multiple projects at once. Most are permanently employed, suggesting a degree of stability in the workforce, although a significant proportion of SROs are relatively new to the role.

These are complex, high-stakes and highly visible roles. Leaders are often appointed quickly, with limited preparation, and are expected to carry significant responsibility, sometimes with limited support. What leaders described in interviews, workshops and forums is therefore not surprising. It is, however, worth hearing in their own words.

"It's exhilarating – and exhausting. You carry the weight of a nation's expectations."

Across interviews, workshops, and the survey, leaders described what the role feels like day-to-day: the pride of purpose, the weight of accountability, and the personal toll of steering complex projects in the public eye. They spoke of the satisfaction of delivering assets that improve people's lives and of navigating politics, scrutiny, and complexity with limited authority or institutional support.

Across these conversations a consistent picture emerged, with leaders describing a set of recurring realities that shape the experience of leading public infrastructure projects.

Image source: Watercare, Central Interceptor tunnel

1. They carry the weight of public trust

2. High responsibility with limited control

3. Constant complexity shapes daily leadership

4. Process can get in the way of progress

5. Leadership under constant scrutiny

6. They do it with limited support – and at the risk of burnout

7. Purpose keeps them going

The lived reality of public sector infrastructure leadership

1.

They carry the weight of public trust

You're accountable to Ministers, CEs, Treasury, communities and the media. Everyone expects certainty in an environment that's anything but.

You lie awake thinking about safety, costs, reputational risk and the next headline.

Leaders described a deep sense of personal accountability that extends beyond project milestones to public outcomes and trust.

This accountability is both motivating and draining. It fuels commitment to deliver but exposes leaders to pressures rarely understood outside the role. They balance delivery realities with political expectations, knowing that a single decision or delay can become tomorrow's headline.

> When it goes well, no one notices. When it goes wrong, everyone does.

2.

High responsibility with limited control

You're responsible for everything – but you don't always control the people, the budget, or the timelines.

I was accountable for hundreds of millions, but not given the mandate or support to lead well.

You carry huge accountability but not the authority or recognition that goes with it.

The most common frustration across roles was the mismatch between responsibility and authority. Many described being accountable for outcomes they could not fully influence.

Being accountable without agency was cited as the single biggest risk to good leadership. Leaders called for clearer delegations, decision pathways that match responsibility, and governance that enables rather than constrains leadership.

> You carry huge accountability but not the authority or recognition that goes with it.

3.

Constant complexity shapes daily leadership

Every decision involves trade-offs – cost, scope, stakeholders, and politics. There's no simple answer, just better judgement.

Complexity isn't the enemy – it's pretending it's simple that gets us into trouble.

Leaders spoke about navigating constant complexity – technical, political, and relational.

No two projects are alike, and progress rarely follows a straight line. Leaders said that thriving in this environment requires calm under pressure, curiosity, and relational skill – qualities that can be developed only through experience, reflection, and trust.

> You're constantly negotiating alignment – upwards, sideways, and outwards. You can't lead by title; you lead by how you bring people with you.

4.

Process can get in the way of progress

Having to rewrite the business case for the budget bid template and then again later... is all extra work that is not great value and takes up considerable time and cost.

Dumb things live in Business Case churn.

While leaders value good governance, many said the system's procedural layers slow them down and can negatively impact speed of delivery. They described an environment of rework and shifting goalposts, constant rescoping, re-approval, and re-justification as political and financial settings change. These duplications and misalignments between funding and delivery were seen as systemic inefficiencies that erode confidence and waste capability.

> You never feel finished – the goalposts move before the ink's dry.

The lived reality of public sector infrastructure leadership

5.

Leadership under constant scrutiny

Everything is public, and the media pick up any delay.

The scrutiny and politics mean no one wants to take a risk.

Every delay feels like a failure, even when it's the right thing to do.

Public-sector project leadership happens under constant visibility. Leaders said the level of scrutiny – from Ministers, agencies, media, and the public – shapes how they lead and where they focus their energy.

Many described how this exposure influences behaviour and drives risk aversion. When every change or delay attracts attention, leaders can become cautious about decisions that might invite criticism. Leaders said they accept accountability and transparency as part of public service, but the level of oversight can make it difficult to stay focused on delivery.

There's no safety net when things get tough – just a lot of responsibility and little support.

6.

They do it with limited support – and at the risk of burnout

I stepped into an SRO role with no induction, no mentoring, and no clear scope.

It can be a lonely role – you're meant to know everything but there's nowhere safe to ask questions.

You find yourself doing the best you can with the skills you have, but with no one to turn to for advice.

Many leaders said they were appointed into roles without induction, coaching, or clarity about scope – a gap that leaves even experienced leaders vulnerable in high-stakes settings.

These experiences were echoed in the Leaders Survey, where lack of support was one of the most frequent themes in open responses. Without targeted induction, mentoring, or targeted support, the system relies on individual resilience rather than institutional support. Many leaders warned that burnout, turnover, and avoidable risk are the natural consequences of this gap.

You're always managing optics – not just delivery.

7.

Purpose keeps them going

When you see the first patients walk into a new hospital – that's why we do it.

Despite these pressures, leaders emphasised why they stay, the privilege of creating lasting public value.

They described deep pride in tangible outcomes and a shared desire to leave the system better for those who follow. Yet many acknowledged that the emotional balance is delicate, pride sits alongside fatigue, and purpose can only sustain people for so long without better structures of support.

We get to build things that matter – schools, roads, water systems – that generations will use.

System barriers that undermine performance

"We set up so many layers of governance it can take six months to make a decision."

Public sector infrastructure leaders want to deliver better, faster, and with greater confidence. Yet many describe working within a public sector system that was not designed for the scale, complexity, and risk profile of major infrastructure projects.

The public sector is well set up to ensure policy accountability and protect the public interest. It is not, however, organised around sustained delivery capability and there are challenges with accountability for infrastructure delivery. Large, multi-year infrastructure investments require embedded commercial expertise, construction and programme management experience, strong risk and controls discipline, stable teams, and long-term funding certainty. These are not consistently built into the system's design. Capability is often assembled project by project, roles change frequently, and funding cycles can be short term.

This misalignment creates ongoing strain for leaders. They must translate policy decisions into projects that can be delivered, often compensating for gaps in structure, continuity, and technical depth.

Leaders are clear that these pressures are not isolated incidents. They reflect recurring, system-level barriers that shape behaviour, influence decision-making, increase delivery risk, and limit performance. Through engagement and survey feedback, these barriers consistently fell into seven key themes.

1. Appointment practices and remuneration barriers

2. Undefined roles and inconsistent expectations

3. Insufficient in-house technical depth

4. Unrealistic investment settings

5. Governance that constrains rather than enables

6. Political churn that disrupts project continuity

7. A system built for approval, rather than delivery

System barriers that undermine performance

1 Appointment practices and remuneration barriers

Appointments to critical project roles in the public sector, especially for SROs, are reportedly often made by hierarchy or convenience rather than by capability or fit. Leaders described a system where people are appointed to lead, but not set up to succeed.

Many leaders said this approach discourages the most capable people from stepping up. Roles are filled by whoever is available, not those with the right experience and judgement. This results in inconsistency, high turnover, and avoidable delivery risks, including delays, budget overruns, and reduced stakeholder confidence.

Remuneration was raised repeatedly as a barrier to attracting and retaining the right leaders. Many noted that SRO and PD roles carry significant accountability and delivery risk, but remuneration settings do not reflect the scale, political exposure, or technical complexity of these roles. Leaders said this creates a disincentive for high performers to pursue or remain in these positions, and in some agencies makes it difficult to compete with internal managerial roles or the private sector for the same talent.

This lack of alignment between responsibility and pay undermines the capability pipeline over time. Talented individuals opt out, leaving the public sector overly reliant on whoever happens to be available rather than those best equipped to deliver outcomes.

> It often feels like a bit of a 'closed shop' or a 'boys club' when it comes to getting the more senior infrastructure leadership roles...

> Too often, critical roles are filled by whoever holds the management job, not by the person best equipped to lead.

> The system isn't set up to recruit the best leaders – remuneration just isn't aligned to the complexity.

> The public sector system of annual pay increases unrelated to performance is terrible and drives the wrong behaviours, ditto the glass ceiling for pay bands. I have not had a pay increase in two years and won't unless I move.

> Remuneration is low for the roles and duties I perform.

What we know from elsewhere

Infrastructure NZ Sentiment Report (AECOM, 2025) records declining confidence in leadership continuity and succession across government projects.

Industrial Megaprojects (Merrow, 2015) "Even after controlling for every other factor that affects success, turnover of the project director is associated with a higher failure rate."

System barriers that undermine performance

2 Undefined roles and inconsistent expectations

Across agencies, leaders said there is no consistent understanding of what SROs, ProgDs, or PDs are expected to do. Titles, mandates, and accountabilities vary widely, sometimes even within the same organisation. In one agency, the SRO is a full-time executive accountable for benefits; in another, it is a senior manager expected to sponsor a project alongside their day job.

This ambiguity blurs accountability and makes it hard to assess or support performance. The same confusion surrounds PD roles. Leaders described a patchwork of expectations across agencies, some with full delivery authority and budget control, others managing complex programmes without any formal delegation.

Without standardised role definitions or capability benchmarks, the system cannot compare performance, build mobility, or develop a credible pipeline of future SROs. Agencies reinvent job descriptions, learning, and support each time a new project begins, creating cost and inconsistency.

> There's no clear route to become an SRO – you just get tapped on the shoulder one day.

> We don't even agree what a Project Director is. In one agency it's a senior public servant; in another it's a consultant on a day rate.

> You wouldn't run HR or Finance without standard position descriptions – why do we do it for projects worth billions?

> Lots of roles and positions will get confused if we don't have clarity. You need to be able to say what's different.

> Every agency defines SRO differently – sometimes it's governance, sometimes it's another hat on top of your day job.

What we know from elsewhere

UK Infrastructure & Projects Authority (Spence, 2019) mandates standardised SRO and Project Director role profiles to reduce duplication and confusion.

Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (New Zealand Government Procurement, 2019) "Agencies must establish clear governance roles and responsibilities that are communicated to everyone involved in the project."

System barriers that undermine performance

3 Insufficient in-house technical depth

Leaders consistently noted that many agencies do not retain sufficient in-house technical expertise aligned to the assets they are responsible for. While external advisers and contractors provide essential specialist input, limited internal technical depth can weaken the public sector's ability to test assumptions, challenge advice, and make confident long-term decisions.

Without embedded asset literacy and delivery experience, agencies risk becoming reliant on external judgement for scope definition, risk assessment, and key trade-offs. Over time, this reduces institutional memory and limits the system's ability to act as a confident and capable client.

Leaders emphasised that this is structural, not individual. Financial settings often make it easier to purchase or rent capability, rather than to develop it. Capital budgets readily fund consultants and delivery partners, while operating budgets rarely sustain long-term investment in experienced practitioners, mentoring, or succession. The result is a built-in bias toward outsourcing rather than growing internal capability.

While external expertise is often essential, reliance on it has become routine. Short-term funding cycles and project-by-project procurement encourage transactional contracting, while internal capability, which requires continuity and investment, is treated as an overhead rather than a core delivery asset.

When projects end, knowledge and context frequently leave with contractors, forcing agencies to rebuild capability for the next investment. Leaders were clear that technical depth and delivery literacy must be recognised and funded as integral to project delivery, not optional extras. Without deliberate investment in internal expertise, the public sector's ability to act as a confident and capable infrastructure client remains constrained.

> It's easier to get a consultant through the capital budget than to hire a capable project director on staff.

> We rent capability – we don't build it.

> We underinvest in the people who'll be here for the next project.

> There is a recognition of the need for development, but the willingness to do so at the organisational level is poor and needs to change.

> There's no development, no training, no place.

What we know from elsewhere

Te Waihanga Mental Health Infrastructure Programme Review (2022) concluded that limited internal investment led to dependence on consultants and loss of institutional learning.

Infrastructure New Zealand & Connexa (2025) shows permanent, cross-functional teams improved delivery time by 35%.

System barriers that undermine performance

4 Unrealistic investment settings

Leaders said projects frequently begin with funding envelopes or timeframes set well before scope, risk, or delivery realities are properly understood. In the survey, 45% of leaders identified funding that is uncertain, delayed, or insufficient as one of their top three project challenges, the most frequently cited issue across all roles. This instability undermines long-term planning and weakens delivery confidence from the outset.

Leaders described this pattern as routine. Political imperatives to announce initiatives or secure early commitment often drive premature approvals, locking in costs and schedules before planning is complete. Once a cost estimate or completion date is made public, it becomes effectively immovable, even as new information emerges and assumptions change. Leaders spoke about spending months trying to reconcile political commitments with actual project readiness.

Survey results also place changing political priorities among the top system challenges affecting delivery. Commitments are often made to meet Budget cycles or achieve public visibility, rather than because projects are genuinely ready to proceed. As a result, the discipline of defining scope, testing assumptions, and sequencing work is replaced by pressure to meet fiscal and political deadlines.

> The funding was set before the scope was agreed. We spent the next year trying to retrofit reality into the budget.

> The discipline of defining scope and testing assumptions is replaced by a race to meet fiscal deadlines.

> Everyone talks about a black swan event... but if you look at history, risk management and contingency need to be more honest and open.

> We get locked into delivery before the problem is fully defined, because the approvals and the politics demand speed.

> We've got a long-term investment pipeline and visibility to the client base, but the budget is only set on an annual basis.

> We're setting expectations with schools... but the budget is only on an annual basis.

What we know from elsewhere

Te Waihanga, Transmission Gully post-construction review (2024) found affordability thresholds set too low made cost escalation inevitable.

Flyvbjerg (2011) Over Budget, Over Time identifies premature political commitments as a global cause of project overruns.

System barriers that undermine performance

5 Governance that constrains rather than enables

Leaders shared that project boards and steering groups are often too large, too static, and too risk averse. Decision rights are blurred, and assurance becomes compliance to protect agencies from risk rather than to enable delivery. Multiple steering groups, advisory boards, and review panels create overlapping oversight sometimes exist with no single line of authority.

This fragmentation can slow decision-making, diffuse accountability, and drives risk aversion. Some leaders described decision theatre – extensive meetings, briefings, and papers that create the appearance of control while slowing real progress.

Leaders said good governance should be small, skilled, and able to change over time. Boards should be sized to match the level of risk and include people with real delivery experience. When governance is set up this way, it gives leaders confidence to make decisions, rather than creating fear of getting it wrong.

Leaders want governance to be designed intentionally, not administratively. They said the best boards provide psychological safety to raise issues early, clarity about who decides what, and consistent support across project phases.

> We set up so many layers of governance that it can take 6 months to 1 yr to make a decision – does this actually add value to the project?

> Assurance is treated like an audit, not as help – it adds time but doesn't build confidence.

> Everyone's in charge of something, but no one's in charge of everything.

> More governance around a project increases the chances of failure.

> We make decision-making too hard.

What we know from elsewhere

Te Waihanga, City Rail Link Lessons Learnt (2023) called for adaptive, phase-fit governance and smaller expert boards to speed decisions.

Te Waihanga, Transmission Gully post-construction review (2024) found overlapping governance slowed progress and diluted accountability.

System barriers that undermine performance

6 Political churn that disrupts project continuity

Leaders said frequent changes in political direction, funding priorities, and ministerial focus often force projects to be rescoped, reordered, or renamed, sometimes more than once in a single planning cycle.

In the survey, 40% of leaders said changing political priorities that affect delivery were their biggest project challenge, making this the second most common challenge overall.

Leaders explained that constant change breaks momentum. Each reset disrupts relationships, governance arrangements, and project messages, adding delay and cost. Knowledge is lost just as trust and confidence start to build.

They said the impacts extend beyond government. Suppliers struggle to keep staff when work stops and starts, and delivery teams lose motivation when they are asked to repeatedly rejustify projects that still meet the same public need.

Many leaders called for stronger cross-party agreement on the long-term infrastructure pipeline and funding that extends beyond election cycles. They said political oversight should set direction and provide stability, not disrupt delivery. This directly reflects the National Infrastructure Plan's emphasis on long-term, needs-based investment planning to reduce instability and policy shifts, increase clarity of long-term investment intentions for public infrastructure agencies, and strengthen independent advice for infrastructure prioritisation so that decisions endure beyond electoral cycles and provide confidence to delivery agencies and the market.

> We spend millions repackaging the same project every three years.

> Every time the policy changes, the project has to prove itself again – even if the need hasn't changed.

> It's hard to build continuity when policy changes every few years.

> When the goalposts move, you lose people. They get tired of starting again.

> Short-term cycles make it hard to plan for the long term – we need bipartisan commitment to the pipeline.

What we know from elsewhere

Te Waihanga, Dunedin Hospital Independent Review (2024) identified repeated ministerial and funding resets as major sources of delay.

Flyvbjerg (2014) What You Should Know About Megaprojects highlights how political incentives favour the initiation of megaprojects, which can undermine sustained commitment and continuity over their long delivery timelines.

System barriers that undermine performance

7 A system built for approval, rather than delivery

Leaders said processes designed to safeguard public investment have sometimes become ends in themselves. They said frameworks like Better Business Cases and Gateway are sound in principle but are at times distorted by a culture of compliance.

Rigid templates and review cycles can shift attention from problem definition and delivery capability to documentation and assurance. Instead of supporting confident decisions, process can dominate purpose. Business cases are often rewritten to fit templates rather than clearly set out the problem, options, and reasoning. Assurance processes, while important, can at times be treated as compliance exercises rather than opportunities to test readiness and strengthen delivery.

Leaders want frameworks refocused on deliverability, benefits and capability. Gateway and Better Business Case processes should test whether teams are ready and equipped to deliver, not just whether they have completed the required steps. This aligns with the National Infrastructure Plan's emphasis on strengthening government as a sophisticated client and improving project evaluation and delivery capability, shifting the system from compliance-driven approval to value-focused delivery.

A culture that rewards readiness, transparency and reflection strengthens accountability and reduces risk.

> Business casing is about approval, not readiness.

> Readiness isn't rewarded – only approval is.

> We start design and procurement before the problem is fully defined, because the funding cycle forces us to.

> Delegations are pitiful compared to the spending we do.

> The process isn't the problem – it's that we treat it as an end in itself.

What we know from elsewhere

Office of the Auditor-General (2023) "Ministers should balance the need to act quickly with appropriate processes to support value for money, transparency, and accountability when making major investment decisions."

National Audit Office (2020) finds that excessive process and documentation can obscure accountability and weaken effective governance and leadership judgement.

Capability gaps that constrain leaders

"You can't lead by title – you lead by how you bring people with you."

The seven barriers discussed in the previous section describe a system that makes effective leadership harder than it needs to be. But system design alone does not determine outcomes. Leaders operate within the system, and they also shape it.

Where leaders escalate risk early, governance improves. Where they build commercial confidence, the public sector becomes a stronger client. Where they invest in their teams, delivery becomes more resilient. The relationship runs both ways.

This report is about understanding where change is possible and who can drive it. The system can better align authority with accountability, invest in internal capability rather than routinely renting it, simplify governance and assurance, and provide more stable investment settings. Leaders, in turn, can escalate risk early and transparently, strengthen their commercial, governance, and delivery judgement, test scope and timing assumptions with discipline, and build the trust and psychological safety that hold delivery teams together.

Stronger system settings enable better leadership. Stronger leadership practice reinforces system performance. The evidence points clearly toward both.

The 2025 Leaders Survey asked respondents to identify their three priority development areas against the Project Director Capability Framework. Their responses are consistent across roles: the most significant gaps lie in the capabilities that are hardest to build and easiest to undervalue. Where judgement is stretched, governance confidence is low, or delivery experience is limited, risks surface later, trade-offs become less explicit, and escalation is delayed often at significant cost to projects and the people leading them. These are the capabilities that follow: judgement under pressure, leading with influence, governance confidence, commercial acumen, and delivery literacy. Leaders are clear that strengthening them is central to improving infrastructure performance. They are often called soft skills. In practice, they are the capabilities on which major infrastructure investments often stand or fall.

"We know the frameworks, what we need now is the confidence and judgement to lead through complexity."

1. **Project governance**
2. **Leading with influence**
3. **Public sector leadership**
4. **Business case management**
5. **People leadership**
6. **Commercial and budget management**
7. **Delivery literacy – understanding how things get built**

Capability gaps that constrain leaders

1 Project governance

Project governance was the most in-demand development area across the three roles in the Leaders Survey selected by 60% of SROs, 62.5% of PDs, and 51% of ProgDs.

Leaders recognise that their governance confidence and judgement must improve. They said governance is where leadership, accountability, and delivery converge and where capability gaps have the greatest impact.

Some SROs said they understand the mechanics of governance but struggled with the practical art of chairing well – creating clarity, balancing challenge with support, and turning complex information into confident decisions. Several highlighted that they chair boards without prior training or mentoring, learning through experience rather than preparation.

Assurance and oversight were also areas where leaders wanted to build confidence. They said assurance should help identify issues early, not operate as a retrospective audit.

> Often, SROs don't actually have relevant experience... They don't know what questions to ask, or notice red flags.

> There's a whole system of committees and approvals, but very few people who can actually decide.

> We spend a lot of time in meetings but not always making decisions.

> Chairing is not the same as attending. You need the confidence to test advice and close the loop, not just facilitate discussion.

2 Leading with influence

Leading with influence ranked second overall in the Leaders Survey and was the top capability priority for ProgDs. It was selected by 55% of SROs, 58% of ProgDs, and 38% of PDs, highlighting a shared need to strengthen capabilities that enable alignment, feedback, and confidence across teams and stakeholders.

Leaders recognise that technical skill alone is not enough; the ability to bring diverse players together around a shared direction is essential when authority is dispersed across agencies, boards, and delivery partners.

Leaders are expected to lead coalitions, not hierarchies. They must align Ministers, agencies, iwi partners, suppliers, and communities while navigating competing mandates and compressed timelines. Yet few feel they are prepared. Many said they learned by trial and error, and that when alignment falters, process and escalation often take its place, reinforcing a culture of compliance rather than collaboration.

> You can't lead by title – you lead by how you bring people with you.

> Where there's most challenge and issues almost always boils down to relationships between people.

> The hardest part isn't the project; it's getting everyone pointing in the same direction.

> Building large complex teams to deliver some of the most important public infrastructure is very challenging.

Capability gaps that constrain leaders

3 Public sector leadership

Navigating the authorising environment – Ministers, central agencies, media, and public expectations, ranked among the top three capability priorities for both SROs and PDs in the Leaders Survey. More than half of respondents said they wanted to build confidence in managing political relationships and maintaining delivery momentum under scrutiny.

Leaders described learning political navigation by experience, not through formal development. Many said they were appointed into roles with high political exposure but little guidance on how to engage confidently with Ministers or manage shifting policy priorities.

They emphasised that technical delivery skills alone are not enough in the public sector. Leadership success depends on understanding how to balance accountability, timing, and trust in politically sensitive environments.

> You're accountable to Ministers, Treasury, and the public – but you don't always control the levers.

> The hardest part isn't the project; it's the politics.

> Managing at the political interface is still a hard area. Ministers are a mystery to them (PDs)... how to navigate that world is a foreign language.

> CEOs and ministries etc are disconnected from the reality of their tier 2 & 3 leaders and this is preventing the next level down from making real effective change work, a lot of time is spent dealing with political elements not the actual project or programme.

4 Business case management

Business case and investment planning capability did not rank among the top survey priorities, yet it emerged strongly across workshops, meet-ups and peer forums as an area where many leaders want to grow their capability. They said that while frameworks and templates are well understood, leading the thinking behind a business case, framing the problem, testing assumptions, and maintaining strategic clarity is far harder in practice.

Leaders described the need to strengthen their confidence in shaping investment proposals, not just shepherding them through approval. Several noted that effective business case leadership involves storytelling as much as structure: explaining why an investment matters, what outcomes it seeks, and how choices have been weighed.

Many also reflected on the personal skill of maintaining discipline under pressure. Political and funding timelines often compress planning time, requiring leaders to balance pragmatism with integrity – progressing work while resisting the urge to cut corners.

Leaders see business case and investment planning as a leadership capability – about influencing, framing, and deciding – not a technical exercise. They want to build the confidence to lead that process with conviction, ensuring that readiness, realism, and public value are front and centre from the start.

> It's not more rules we need, it's the capability and trust to use the ones we already have.

> A strong business case tells a story that decision-makers can believe in – not just one they can sign off.

> Readiness should be a leadership milestone, not a political inconvenience.

> Good planning is a leadership act – it's where you set the tone for governance, risk, and relationships.

Capability gaps that constrain leaders

5 People leadership

Leaders said their teams often run flat-out for years with limited opportunity for recovery. Many described constant pressure, tight deadlines, and little capacity for reflection or development.

They identified capability gaps in coaching, feedback, and wellbeing practices – areas they see as essential for maintaining performance and retention.

Survey data confirmed that people leadership and resilience ranked among the top five development priorities across all roles.

Leaders said the challenge is amplified by the project environment itself. Delivery relies on temporary teams, short-term contracts, and hybrid work arrangements that make it harder to build cohesion and sustain morale.

Several noted that people leadership in project environments requires a different kind of skill – relational and adaptive rather than hierarchical.

They agreed that this capability gap matters because infrastructure delivery depends on temporary organisations held together by trust and morale, not hierarchy. Leaders called for more development in coaching, wellbeing, and feedback skills, not as soft skills, but as performance essentials.

> Under pressure and sometimes stressed or grumpy – we're human too. The best leaders acknowledge that.

> We don't spend enough time on our people – it's all delivery, all the time.
>
> Leaders are burning out because they don't have the right support systems in place.

> Our teams are project based, constantly changing – you've got to keep rebuilding trust every few months.

> The good ones coach, they don't command.

6 Commercial and budget management

Leaders want to be commercially capable clients, not just good process stewards.

They repeatedly emphasised that the public sector cannot be a sophisticated client without deeper commercial acumen. Facing highly experienced suppliers and international contractors, they were clear that they must have equal confidence to negotiate value, manage performance, and collaborate on risk – not rely solely on process or legal advice.

Across interviews and forums, leaders described a recurring imbalance: they were often out-matched by private sector teams with decades of deal-making experience. Several SROs said that while procurement frameworks are sound, public servants often lack the commercial judgement to challenge assumptions or use contracts as strategic levers.

Survey results confirmed this theme. Commercial and procurement capability ranked among the top three development needs across all roles, with over 70% of leaders rating themselves competent but under-confident when leading commercial discussions. Many cited reliance on external advisers as evidence of an internal capability gap.

This gap leaves the public sector reliant on external advisers and weakens its ability to act as an intelligent owner and counterparty.

> We need to be able to speak the same language as the market – that's how you get value, not by tightening the contract.

> You've got some very sophisticated contractors across the table, and we've got people who've never been in that world – they're smart, but they haven't seen how these deals actually work.

> We need to be confident clients, not just contract managers.

> We can't build commercial confidence without time in the market and the right support.

Capability gaps that constrain leaders

7 Delivery literacy – understanding how things get built

Leaders said the lack of delivery and construction experience at senior levels is one of the biggest risks to project success. Many are accountable for very large programmes without having hands-on experience delivering complex projects.

They said practical delivery knowledge is often missing at the governance table. This weakens decision-making and makes it harder to test advice, challenge assumptions, or understand the real impacts of delay, risk, and change.

Leaders said stronger delivery literacy would lead to better decisions, clearer communication with contractors, and more trust between government and the market. Without it, projects are more exposed to unrealistic expectations, slow or cautious decisions, and loss of credibility with delivery partners.

Leaders said this issue is not new. It was also highlighted in the *Te Waihanga Insights for major project delivery report (2025)* where interviewees noted that many senior decision-makers came from policy backgrounds rather than major project delivery, contributing to misalignment and governance difficulties.

> Some SROs have never delivered a project, yet they're accountable for billion-dollar decisions.

> Often, SROs don't actually have relevant experience, which is dangerous for successful project delivery.

> We need people who understand what it takes to build, not just approve.

> We have very clever subject-matter experts who are in leadership, but just because they're good at what they do in their day to day doesn't necessarily mean they're good at being an SRO.

What would improve performance

"We need to treat these roles like real jobs, not side duties."

Leaders are looking for a system that builds trusts and capability and aligns authority, time, and reward. Their feedback is clear, New Zealand has good people, but they are working against the grain of their own processes. The changes the leaders propose cluster around three connected priority areas – strengthening the talent system, enabling better decisions and delivery, and investing in learning and capability. Together, these priorities would create the conditions for confident leadership and more reliable delivery across the public sector.

"The system is full of good people working against the grain of its own processes."

What leaders said would improve performance

Strengthen the talent system

1. Appoint and reward leaders based on capability
2. Build a recognised profession for project leadership
3. Enable mobility and grow a leadership pipeline

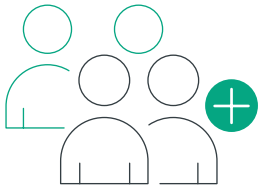
Enable better decisions and delivery

4. Strengthen project governance to build confidence
5. Simplify and align the delivery system
6. Set realistic and stable investment parameters

Invest in capability and learning

7. Invest in targeted capability building
8. Make learning a routine part of delivery

What would improve performance



Strengthen the talent system

1.

Appoint and reward leaders based on capability

Appointments to critical roles must be deliberate, transparent, and based on capability rather than hierarchy or convenience.

Leaders called for consistent role definitions and assessment of experience before appointment. SRO, ProgD and PD roles should be treated as system-critical, full-time positions, not honorary titles added on top of other jobs.

Remuneration also needs to match accountability. Aligning responsibility, tenure, and reward will be essential to attract and retain the calibre of leadership required for major investments.

> We need to treat these roles like real jobs, not side duties.

2.

Build a recognised profession for project leadership

Leaders want project leadership to be recognised as a profession with defined standards, pathways, and pride, akin to engineering or finance. Only one in three survey participants said their appointment process formally assessed capability, and fewer than a quarter had received structured induction or succession planning. A national certification process or professional standard could provide a visible benchmark for competence, judgement, and experienced leadership.

Professionalisation would make capability portable between agencies, strengthen appointment confidence, and signal that project leadership is a career to grow in, not a role to fall into.

> There should be a national benchmark for project leadership, like engineers have.

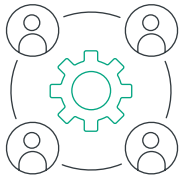
3.

Enable mobility and grow a leadership pipeline

Fewer than one in four survey respondents have ever been offered a cross-agency placement. Leaders said that rotational experience is the fastest way to build judgement, resilience, and shared standards. A national mobility model, linking central and local government, Crown entities, and state-owned enterprises, would keep knowledge within the public sector and strengthen continuity between projects.

> Secondments are how we learn to see the system, not just our part of it.

What would improve performance



Enable better decisions and delivery

4.

Strengthen project governance to build confidence

Nearly half of leaders said governance and decision-making are too complex or unclear. They want boards that enable decisions, not slow them down.

Leaders proposed smaller, phase-fit boards with defined delegations and the ability to evolve as projects move through stages. Governance should be proportionate to risk, include delivery-experienced members, and balance oversight with trust, providing confidence to act, not fear of blame.

> It's not that we need more frameworks – we need permission to use judgement.

5.

Simplify and align the delivery system

Leaders described a delivery system cluttered with overlapping guidance and duplicated processes across Treasury, MBIE, and Te Waihanga. Simplification does not mean less assurance; it means joining up what already exists.

They want a single coherent view of the investment and assurance system, with an emphasis on readiness rather than paperwork. Integrated central agency guidance would allow projects to move faster while maintaining accountability and transparency.

> More consistency across agencies would save a lot of reinvention.

6.

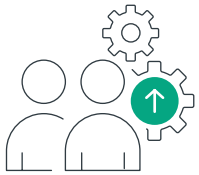
Set realistic and stable investment parameters

Funding instability is the most universal barrier to focus on. Across all roles, 52% of respondents to the Leaders Survey identified uncertain or delayed funding as the single biggest blocker to delivery confidence. Political priorities changing mid-delivery ranked second.

Leaders want investment settings grounded in evidence, not electoral cycles. They proposed formal go/no-go reviews to test scope, risk, and funding alignment before public commitments are made, and multi-year funding profiles that allow for stability through political cycles. Moving from 'announce and defend' to 'plan and deliver' would immediately improve confidence and performance.

> Getting longer-term certainty of funding and less changes in direction following elections would make it better to plan and deliver.

What would improve performance



Invest in capability and learning

7.

Invest in targeted capability building

Capability development must become a planned input to delivery, not a discretionary extra. A total of 41% of survey respondents said funding models should explicitly enable leadership development, mentoring, and coaching.

Leaders prioritised practical development in commercial acumen, procurement, political navigation, iwi partnership practice, and governance judgement. They favoured short, applied learning supported by peer coaching and cross-agency communities of practice, building confidence and a shared leadership language across the system.

> There's currently no skills development coming into the role – would be helpful if we had modules or training, some supporting docs which could be shared.

8.

Make learning a routine part of delivery

Learning needs to be built into live projects, not confined to post-mortems. In the Leaders Survey, fewer than 30% of respondents said their agency routinely shares lessons between projects.

Leaders proposed short, peer-based project reflection sessions and an online library of concise case studies, accessible across agencies. Embedding reflection into normal delivery practice would shift learning from compliance to continuous improvement and ensure experience is retained where it can make the most difference.

> If we talked to each other more, we'd make fewer of the same mistakes.

From evidence to action: public sector project leadership

"Capability building should be recognised as a legitimate part of project delivery, not an optional extra."

The evidence in this report is clear: New Zealand does not lack committed infrastructure leaders. It has a system that makes effective leadership harder than it needs to be.

Across interviews, forums, and surveys, leaders identified the same problem: leadership capability is treated as optional rather than essential. Accountability is high, but authority, continuity, and support are often misaligned. Capability development is valued in principle but not always funded or embedded. As a result, success relies too heavily on individual resilience and goodwill, not system design.

A confident public sector client requires both strong leadership capability and sufficient technical and commercial depth to commission, challenge, and steward complex assets effectively. Where capability is thin or uneven, agencies may become more reliant on external advice and governance becomes procedural rather than decisive. The consequences can be serious. Under-supported leadership slows decisions, increases risk, drives reliance on external advisers, and undermines confidence across government, markets, and communities. Over time, this erodes value for money and weakens the public sector's credibility as a confident and capable client of infrastructure.

Accountability must sit alongside support. Leadership roles should be clearly defined, professionally supported, and proportionately assured. They must also be exercised with discipline, transparency, and readiness to escalate risk early. Confidence in delivery depends on both system design and leadership practice.

Improvement does not require a system overhaul. Leaders are asking for better alignment of roles, authority, funding, and learning, and for leadership capability to be treated as a core system input rather than a discretionary extra. These findings, informed by local and international evidence, directly shaped Recommendation 16 of the National Infrastructure Plan: to develop a consistent, system-wide approach to appointing, developing, and supporting public sector infrastructure leaders.

Recommendation 16

Public sector project leadership

Strengthen public sector project leadership through a consistent, system-wide approach to appointing, developing, and supporting infrastructure leaders.

Responsible agencies:
New Zealand Infrastructure Commission and Public Service Commission

Timeframe: 2026–2029.

Implementation Pathway

This could be implemented by:

- Creating a professional standard for public sector infrastructure leadership.
- Designing a cross-agency talent management framework for recruitment, development, and mobility.
- Specifying, and funding, leadership development as a core input to project delivery so capability building is systematic, not optional.

Source: National infrastructure plan 2026

From evidence to action: public sector project leadership through Recommendation 16 in the Plan

Strengthen public sector project leadership through a consistent system-wide approach to appointing, developing, and supporting infrastructure leaders.

1.

Create a professional standard for public sector infrastructure leadership

The evidence in this report shows that while investment frameworks and delivery assurance mechanisms are established in the public sector, there is comparatively weak and inconsistent assurance of the capability of those leading infrastructure projects. Leadership capability is often inferred from CVs, reputation, or seniority, and tends to be scrutinised only once delivery problems emerge. As a result, confidence in the project leader, a critical determinant of project success, remains largely implicit rather than deliberately tested and assured.

Establishing a professional standard for public sector infrastructure leadership provides a practical foundation for addressing this gap. A professional standard would define what "good" looks like for system-critical roles, particularly SROs and PDs, by setting clear expectations for capability, judgement, behaviours, and ethical conduct. It would create a shared language across agencies, support more deliberate and transparent appointment decisions, and strengthen conversations about leadership readiness, development, and support. A professional standard on its own would be a useful starting point; however, to ensure it is effective it would need to be verified through either the agency or an external process. Such a process would provide assurance that leaders have the capability, judgement, and experience required for complex infrastructure delivery, and would support the consistent application of expectations in practice.

A continuum of options to explore in 2026

Encourage

Set expectations

Establish and publish a professional standard for Project Directors and SROs

Require agencies to use it in recruitment and performance conversations.

Strengthen development guidance but leave capability assurance to agencies.

Focus:
Clear expectations

Strengthen

Verify capability

Adopt the professional standard.

Introduce proportionate, independent capability verification for key leadership roles.

Use insights from project assurance processes (such as Gateway reviews) to inform capability assessments and development needs.

Focus:
Capability verification

Assure

Professionalise

Establish a nationally recognised professional benchmark or accreditation for system-critical infrastructure leadership roles.

Provide system-wide confidence that leaders appointed to major projects meet consistent capability expectations.

Make leadership capability visible and transferable across agencies.

Embed structured career pathways and mobility for infrastructure leadership roles.

Focus:
Professional credibility and leadership assurance

Defines what good leadership looks like and provides the foundation for leadership assurance.

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2.

Design a cross-agency talent management framework for recruitment, development and mobility

The evidence in this report shows that infrastructure leadership capability is fragmented across agencies, with limited visibility of talent, weak succession planning, and few structured pathways for development or progression. Recruitment, induction, and development are largely agency-specific, resulting in inconsistent expectations, duplicated effort, and avoidable reliance on external capability.

A cross-agency talent management framework would provide greater coherence in how infrastructure leaders are recruited, developed, and deployed across the public sector. It would support more deliberate appointment decisions, improve continuity between projects, and enable leaders to build experience across different delivery environments while remaining within the system.

Such a framework would not centralise employment decisions or remove agency accountability. Rather, it would establish shared approaches to role definitions, capability expectations, and development pathways, enabling mobility, secondments, and progression across agencies. This would help retain institutional knowledge, reduce repeated reinvention, and strengthen the depth of leadership capability available for major programmes.

By making talent more visible and portable across the system, a cross-agency framework would shift the public sector from relying on who happens to be available, to deliberately deploying the right capability where delivery risk and complexity are highest. What this could look like in practice will be explored further in 2026.

A continuum of options to explore in 2026

Encourage

Build visibility

Create a voluntary cross-agency directory of SROs, ProgDs and PDs.

Share role profiles and capability expectations for SROs, ProgDs and PDs across agencies.

Encourage secondments and peer networks.

Publish guidance on succession planning for infrastructure leadership.

Focus:
Capability visibility

Strengthen

Coordinate deployment

Establish a cross-agency talent pool for system-critical roles.

Require leaders appointed to major programmes to demonstrate capability against the professional standard.

Facilitate formal secondments and rotational placements across public sector projects and entities.

Share succession planning information for key infrastructure roles.

Focus:
Deliberate deployment

Assure

Deploy strategically

Create a centrally supported cohort of experienced infrastructure leaders.

Maintain system-wide visibility of leadership capability to support deliberate deployment.

Assign experienced leaders to the highest-risk and most complex projects.

Embed structured career pathways and mobility expectations.

Focus:
System-level leadership assurance

Ensures capable leaders are visible and deliberately deployed to the projects where delivery risk and complexity are highest.

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Strengthen public sector project leadership through a consistent system-wide approach to appointing, developing, and supporting infrastructure leaders.

3.

Specify and fund leadership development as a core input to project delivery so capability building is systematic, not optional

The evidence in this report shows that leadership development is widely recognised as important but rarely treated as a planned or funded part of project delivery. Current funding and delivery models make it easier to purchase external advice than to invest in developing the capability of the leaders accountable for outcomes. As a result, capability building is often ad hoc, uneven, and dependent on individual initiative rather than system design.

Specifying leadership development as a core input to delivery would shift capability building from optional to expected. This means explicitly allowing for leadership development, mentoring, and coaching within project budgets, and aligning development to the points of highest delivery risk.

Treating leadership development as a funded delivery input would also enable learning to be embedded into live projects, rather than confined to post-project reviews. This approach strengthens capability where it matters most, supports retention, and reduces reliance on rented capability over time. By making capability building systematic rather than discretionary, the system can build leadership depth, confidence, and consistency across the infrastructure pipeline. What this could look like in practice will be explored further in 2026.

A continuum of options to explore in 2026

Encourage

Encourage development

Set expectations that leadership development should be included in project planning.

Encourage agencies to allocate time and budget for mentoring, coaching and leadership development.

Expand access to short, targeted masterclasses and peer learning opportunities.

Focus:
Development expectation

Strengthen

Fund development

Require major or system-critical projects to include a defined leadership development component in project budgets.

Esnure project funding can explicitly cover coaching, mentoring, and governance development.

Link development plans to capability gaps identified during appointment or assurance processes.

Embed structured project review sessions during live delivery phases.

Focus:
Targeted capability investment

Assure

Embed development

Mandate leadership development as a standard budget line in major infrastructure projects.

Create a funded, cross-agency leadership development programme aligned with the professional standard.

Establish a structured curriculum of core capabilities needed for effective infrastructure leadership and delivery.

Establish a development pathway that enables leaders to progress toward verified capability against the professional standard.

Embed learning into projects during delivery, including through insights from Gateway and other project assurance reviews.

Focus:
Embedded capability development

Builds leadership capability systematically so the system has a sustainable pipeline of experienced leaders.

Conclusion

This report sheds light on what it takes to lead public sector infrastructure in New Zealand, and what gets in the way. The evidence is clear: outcomes are shaped not only by policy settings, funding decisions, and technical design, but by the quality of leadership that brings these elements together through project delivery.

New Zealand does not lack committed or experienced infrastructure leaders. What it lacks is a system that consistently enables them to succeed.

Across interviews, workshops, and survey responses, leaders described a common pattern. They carry significant accountability, yet often operate with misaligned authority, unstable settings, and limited structured support. Governance can constrain rather than enable. Capability development is widely valued but rarely embedded. Funding cycles and political resets disrupt continuity. In this environment, success depends too heavily on individual resilience and goodwill rather than on deliberate system design.

At the same time, structural improvements alone will not be enough. Leadership practice matters. Delivering complex infrastructure requires judgement under pressure, commercial confidence, clear governance, and the discipline to escalate risks early. Leaders operate within the system, but they also shape how it works in practice. Stronger system settings therefore need to be matched by stronger leadership practice.

Improving infrastructure performance requires a shift in how leadership is understood and supported. Leadership is not an administrative function or an adjunct to policy; it is a core delivery asset. Leaders need to be deliberately appointed, clearly mandated, professionally supported, and proportionately assured, with an expectation that the most capable leaders are deployed where delivery risk is highest.

A confident public sector client requires robust frameworks, and it requires leaders with the authority, capability, and backing to exercise judgement in complex and politically visible environments. When those conditions are in place, decisions are made faster, risks surface earlier, and projects are more likely to deliver value for money.

New Zealand's infrastructure challenges are long term and system-wide and meeting them will require a public sector that treats leadership capability as a strategic investment rather than a discretionary extra.

Investing in the people who lead infrastructure is therefore not optional. It is fundamental to delivering lasting value for New Zealanders.

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