HOUSE OF PMO
HOME TO PMO PROFESSIONALS

AtkinsRéalis

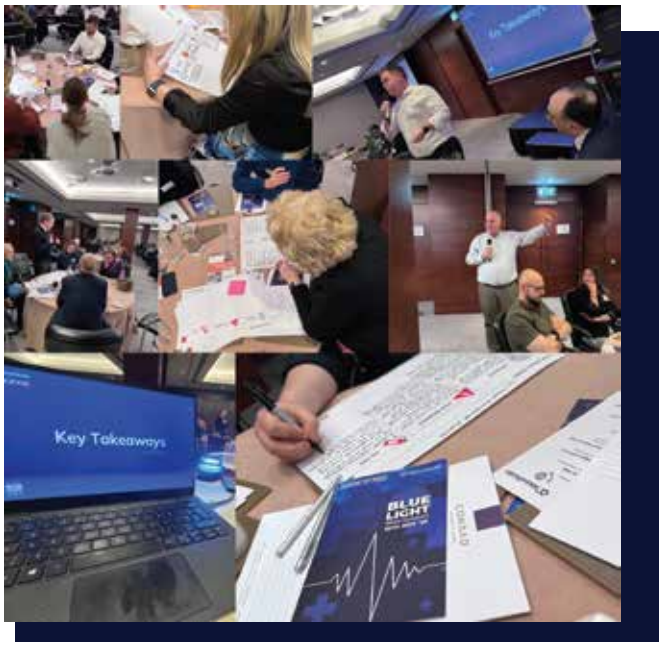
SUPPORTING CHANGE IN BLUE LIGHT SERVICES

PMO SUMMIT REPORT

BLUE LIGHT
PMO SUMMIT

Bringing together the PMOs behind the UK's emergency services

The inaugural PMO Blue Light Summit took place in London on 19 November 2025. Hosted by the House of PMO and AtkinsRéalis, it brought together PMO professionals from across the UK's emergency services.



HOUSE OF PMO
HOME TO PMO PROFESSIONALS

BLUE LIGHT PMO SUMMIT

AtkinsRéalis

Why the Blue Light PMO Summit was Created?

The Blue Light PMO Summit was created to bring together the people who keep change moving in some of the toughest environments in the country. Police, fire and rescue, ambulance services, NHS emergency care, and other public safety organisations all face unique pressures - rapid response, political scrutiny, limited budgets, and constant operational demand. Yet the PMOs supporting this work rarely have a dedicated space to connect, compare notes, and get practical support.

The summit set out to change that.

- **Creating a space to talk honestly about the realities of delivery**
  A chance for PMO teams to speak openly about what's really happening on the ground and share lessons without judgement.
- **Raising the profile of PMOs as strategic partners**
  Showing leaders how PMOs add value, influence outcomes, and support better decision-making across critical services.
- **Tackling shared challenges together**
  Bringing people together to explore common issues and collaborate on practical, workable solutions.
- **Building a stronger community across emergency services**
  Connecting PMO professionals so they can support one another, share experience, and strengthen the sector as a whole.

The Agenda

Welcome from the House of PMO

Keynote: Insights into PMO Transformation - AtkinsRéalis

Case Study: PMO in Policing - AtkinsRéalis and Police UK Org

Panel Session - Real Stories, Real Challenges
Representatives - NHS, Fire, Police and Ambulance

Roundtable Discussions: Challenges and Opportunities in Emergency Services PMOs

HOUSE OF PMO
HOME TO PMO PROFESSIONALS

BLUE LIGHT PMO SUMMIT

AtkinsRéalis

Introduction

Hosted by the House of PMO and AtkinsRéalis, this first-of-its-kind forum aimed to share real experiences from the PMO frontline and identify common challenges in delivering projects under high pressure. Senior PMO professionals, consultants, and practitioners convened in roundtables and panels to discuss what's working, what isn't, and how to elevate the PMO's strategic impact in these critical services. This report consolidates those insights – including candid roundtable outputs, panel perspectives, and community feedback – into a comprehensive view of the top challenges and practical solutions for emergency services PMOs.

The summit underscored that PMOs remain an untapped asset in delivering strategic change under the kind of pressues seen everyday in the Blue Light sector. By learning from each other's successes and setbacks, the emergency services PMO community can align PMO efforts across services, influence leadership engagement, and set the stage for ongoing collaboration through the House of PMO.

> **"PMOs remain an untapped asset in delivering strategic change."**

PMO professionals at the summit identified 16 different challenges, which naturally grouped into four core themes.

- **People and Change**
- **Culture and Collaboration**
- **Delivery and Strategy**
- **Future-Focus**

Further details about these four themes can be found on the next page.

Within this report we have selected the top eight challenge areas which were more generally discussed at the summit, which are:

1. Insufficient Executive Sponsorship
2. PMO as a Strategic Partner (Not Just Admin)
3. Project Management Capability Gaps
4. Prioritisation in an "Everything is Priority" Culture
5. Complex Transformational Change
6. Value for Money – Demonstrating PMO and Portfolio Value
7. Change Fatigue and Sustaining a Change-Ready Culture
8. Stakeholder Engagement and "Not Invented Here" Syndrome

Towards the end of the report we also provide notes on some of the other eight discussed.

The Challenges

The challenges selected for the summit were based on prior 1-2-1 interviews with PMO professionals:

PEOPLE & CHANGE

1. **Insufficient executive sponsorship**
   In projects, programmes and the PMO.
2. **The PMO as a strategic partner**
   Moving from an administrative support function to a proactive, value-driven function.
3. **Long term support for the PMO**
   Constant justification and first in line for budget cuts / challenges.
4. **Alignment to the frontline**
   Keeping PMO and PM linked to the frontline - and not losing sight of what really matters.

DELIVERY & STRATEGY

1. **Project management skills and capability**
   P3M capability, shortage of skilled PM professionals, limited training budgets, resource management implications.
2. **Complex transformational change**
   Lots of constraints - regulatory, political, ICT, regional, national.
3. **PMO service areas**
   Areas such as benefits management, project prioritisation, reporting analytics, business cases etc done inconsistently, with limited ownership and weak links to strategic outcomes.
4. **Low project management maturity**
   Inconsistent frameworks, fragmented governance and limited visibility across portfolios, individual effort rather than organisational capability.

CULTURE & COLLABORATION

1. **Funding constraints - doing more with less**
   Different thinking, creative changes, utilising innovation.
2. **Culture resistance - 'not invented here' mindset**
   Overcoming scepticism, utilising change management approaches.
3. **Change fatigue**
   Techniques and approaches to overcome, focus on staff wellbeing and support.
4. **Cross service collaboration - working across silos**
   Both internally and across emergency service departments and agencies.

FUTURE FOCUS

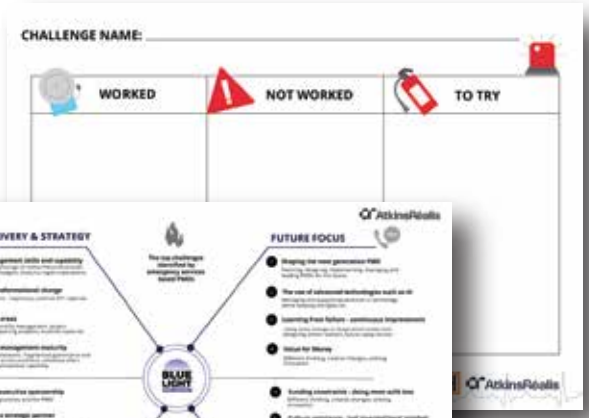
1. **Shaping the next generation PMO**
   Planning, designing, implementing, managing
2. **Using advanced technologies such as AI**
   Managing and supporting advances in technology whilst keeping the lights on.
3. **Learning from failure - continuous improvement**
   Using every change to shape what comes next
4. **Driving Value for Money**
   Different thinking, creative changes, utilising innovation.

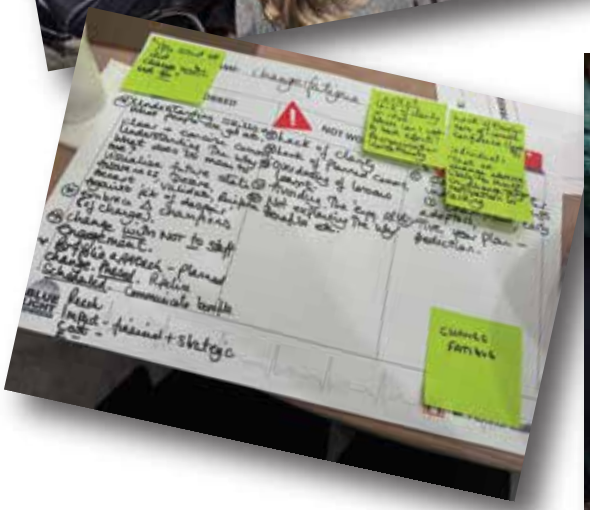
Key Challenges

Not every challenge was equally discussed – some themes dominated multiple tables. In particular, **prioritisation, sponsorship, strategic PMO partnership, complex change, project manager capability gaps, stakeholders, Value for Money and cultural resistance/fatigue** were repeatedly raised as universal difficulties across services. By contrast, a few issues like long-term PMO funding support or cross-service collaboration, while recognised as important, were less frequently chosen as focal topics in the workshop discussions.

In the sections that follow, we examine each major challenge area in turn. For each, we summarise why it matters, share examples of what's working (practical approaches that some organisations have found successful) and what's not working (common pitfalls or obstacles), and suggest actions PMOs can take. These insights are supported by direct quotes and breakout findings from the summit to illustrate the reality on the ground.

> **"This summit has shown we're not alone in the challenges we face and we're stronger when we tackle them together."**





Challenge One: Insufficient Executive Sponsorship

Strong executive sponsorship – for both the PMO and individual projects – is consistently cited as the number one factor for success, yet many organisations struggle to secure engaged, accountable senior sponsors.

Time and again, summit participants shared that their PMO lacks a visible, empowered sponsor at the top, while project sponsors are often unclear, inactive, or absent altogether. Senior leaders are either too busy or unaware of the value their sponsorship brings, sending mixed messages that filter down and weaken both project delivery and the PMO's role.

This lack of sponsorship leaves the PMO marginalised and undermines its authority to enforce good governance. Ultimately, when senior leaders are not visibly backing the PMO or owning project decisions, the organisation gets the message that project management discipline is optional.

"When a PMO has executive sponsorship from day one, they are automatically viewed as credible contributors"

Stand Out Action!

Name one accountable sponsor per initiative and make their decisions visible.

What's Working?

Educating and involving senior sponsors: Several PMOs reported success in training project sponsors and senior responsible owners (SROs) on what their role entails, so they understand how to be effective. For example, providing a brief orientation or one-on-one coaching for new SROs clarifies decision accountabilities and the importance of their visible participation. Simply put, helping executives learn how to be effective sponsors (and even "pinning down" who the true sponsor is for each initiative) improves accountability and buy-in.

Making it easy for leaders to engage: Teams found that being clear and concise in what you ask from executives pays off. One tip was making reports shorter and more decision-focused, so that busy chiefs can quickly grasp where their input is needed. Similarly, defining in advance the key decisions that only the SRO or project board can make (and presenting those in a simple, actionable format) has helped force timely decisions. In other words, explicit decision frameworks – e.g. a checklist of "Sponsor must decide X or Y at Stage Gate 2" – make it easier for senior leaders to engage meaningfully and not just rubber-stamp.

"Critical friend" approach from PMO leaders: Some PMO heads have succeeded by leading from the front and demonstrating strategic thinking in their interactions with executives. By consistently bringing data-driven insights, highlighting alignment to strategic goals, and focusing conversations on outcomes rather than just process, these PMO leaders have earned a reputation as strategic partners. An executive champion who truly "gets the PMO" can amplify PMO impact significantly – for instance, a supportive Chief Executive who publicly states "I want to hear from the PMO directly in our portfolio meetings" sends a strong message and legitimises the PMO's role.

Challenge One: Insufficient Executive Sponsorship

What's Not Working?

Token or "blank check" sponsorship: In some organisations, an executive is named as a sponsor in principle but is either too overextended or too uninformed about projects to actually help. These sponsors rarely show up to steering meetings or only engage when there's a crisis. Participants also warned against dual sponsorship (two executives "sharing" the sponsor role), which led to confusion and inaction – one group bluntly noted, "*dual sponsorship doesn't work*".

Mixed messages from the top: If some executives champion the PMO's processes but others bypass them, it undermines the PMO. Several PMO leads lamented situations where executives say they want prioritisation and governance, but then push pet projects anyway. The result: "everything is high priority" making true prioritisation impossible. Similarly, if a new leader comes in with little regard for the PMO, momentum can be lost overnight – one participant noted that losing a supportive exec sponsor "can collapse support overnight" for the PMO.

"First to cut" syndrome: Without a vocal advocate at the top table, PMOs often find themselves first on the chopping block during budget cuts. This short-sighted cost-saving measure was widely criticised at the summit – cutting the very function that prevents project failures can cost more in the long run. Yet, many PMOs have faced budget or headcount reductions because no senior leader defended their value when budgets tightened.

Lack of empowerment to say no: Being a strategic partner sometimes means speaking truth to power – e.g. advising "this initiative isn't feasible right now" or "we need to stop Project Y to focus on Project Z." Where the PMO staff do not feel empowered (or confident enough) to challenge unrealistic demands, resource overload and misaligned projects proliferate. A few PMO managers admitted they struggled to push back on senior-requested "priority projects" even when capacity was lacking, because "people see you as what you were 5 years ago" – i.e. if the PMO was historically an admin function, it's hard to suddenly act with authority. Overcoming that legacy image is an ongoing battle (discussed more in the Strategic Partner section).

Actions PMOs Can Take

Establish a Single Accountable Sponsor:
Per major initiative; every project or programme has one clearly designated executive sponsor (not a committee) and avoid "joint sponsorship" arrangements. Hold that person visibly accountable for project outcomes – for example, by having project status reports explicitly list the sponsor, requiring their sign-off at key gates and benefits delivery post project delivery.

Demonstrate value in leader-friendly terms:
Use the language of the C-suite to demonstrate the PMO's value. Instead of just reporting compliance metrics, measure the PMO's success by its impact on business outcomes. Consider creating a short annual PMO value report for senior leadership, highlighting money saved, risks mitigated, and delivery improvements achieved.

Secure an Executive Mandate for the PMO's Role:
Work with management to formally endorse the PMO's role in governance. Another idea was to anchor the PMO's mandate in corporate policy or strategy documents, so that it survives individual leadership changes.

Enlist a senior advocate or ally.
If possible, recruit an influential senior officer to be your champion. In some services, the PMO found an ally in, say, the Deputy Chief or a Transformation Director who truly understood modern project delivery.

Challenge Two: PMO as a Strategic Partner

Traditionally, PMOs have often been viewed as administrative support teams or "project police," focused on paperwork, templates, and enforcing process. The summit discussions highlighted a concerted push to transform that image – from "truncheon happy project police" to strategic partners in delivery.

Elevating the PMO to a strategic role means the PMO have a proactive role in decisions about what projects get done and how to ensure they succeed, rather than just checking compliance after decisions are made. This shift is critical in the blue light sector, where the pace and complexity of change demand that PMOs help connect projects to strategic objectives and outcomes. Several participants noted they have finally gained a "seat at the table" – for instance, resulting in the PMO moving under the Strategy or Performance directorate, or having the PMO lead report directly to the CEO.

"We've got a seat at the table, now we have to prove we belong there". Being invited is only the first step; PMOs must demonstrate value in that arena to shed the old "admin" label for good.

Stand Out Action!

Shift one PMO output from 'status' to 'insight'

What's Working?

Reframing the PMO's purpose: Successful teams have redefined what their PMO offers. Instead of positioning as process drivers, they emphasise providing insight and decision support. For example, one PMO started issuing a monthly "Portfolio Insights" report that flags cross-project risks, resource bottlenecks, and strategic alignment issues for the executive team – moving beyond status reporting to analysis. Summit panelists noted that PMOs which engage early in project shaping and support decision-making were described as "invaluable" by their exec teams.

Integration into the business: Some organisations have embedded PMO teams within departments or directorates as business partners. Instead of a distant central office, each PMO member might align to a portfolio of projects and work closely with those project teams (often even sitting with them). This builds trust and allows the PMO to tailor its support.

High-value services and skills: To be seen as more than admin, PMOs broadened the services they provide. For instance, many have taken on benefits management, developed expertise in data analysis or Power BI dashboards.

Early involvement in initiatives: Strategic PMOs ensure they are involved at the ideation or business case stage of projects, rather than being brought in after kickoff. Acting as the organisation's gatekeeper or advisor for new work embeds the PMO into decision-making frameworks.

Alignment with broader improvement programmes: In a few cases, PMOs became part of a larger "business improvement" or transformation office. By integrating with related functions (e.g. performance improvement, innovation, quality assurance), the PMO's work is seen in the context of overall organisational improvement.

Challenge Two: The PMO as a Strategic Partner

What's Not Working?

Persistent "admin office" perceptions: In some organisations, old reputations die hard. If the PMO historically only did reporting and chased updates, some stakeholders struggle to see it any other way. As one PMO head put it, "*people see you as what you were 5 years ago.*"
In a couple of services, parallel fragmented PMO functions made this worse – e.g. a Programme Office in IT and another in Operations, each with different standards. This fragmentation prevented a unified strategic voice and often kept each PMO too small-scale to influence enterprise outcomes.

Brittle gains (lack of institutionalisation): Several PMO leaders noted that their elevated status feels "tenuous and brittle" – it relies on the goodwill of certain individuals and constant advocacy. If the organisation doesn't formally adjust structures or policies to enshrine the PMO's strategic role, a leadership change or a single project issue could revert the PMO back to the sidelines.
For example, one PMO was reporting to the COO and part of quarterly strategy reviews (a great stride forward), but after a reorganisation, they were moved under Finance and lost their strategy forum access. Without sustained executive understanding, the PMO's strategic involvement can be fragile.

Not empowered to challenge: A strategic partner PMO must sometimes say "this can't be done" to ensure resources focus on priorities. In cultures where challenging senior ideas is not welcomed, PMO staff may feel they have to green-light everything to avoid conflict. This undermines the PMO's strategic value. One PMO member admitted they approved all project proposals even if capacity wasn't there, because they didn't feel they could tell directors to wait. Overcoming this requires explicit executive backing (see sponsorship, above) and confidence-building within the PMO team to assert professional judgment and credibility.

Failure to communicate value: Some PMOs do great strategic work but stay in the shadows. As one attendee observed, other departments were "much better at self-promotion" than the PMO. If the wider business never hears about PMO contributions, they will continue to view it as a administration or bureaucratic overhead.

Actions PMOs Can Take

Revisit your mandate and strategy:
Develop a PMO charter or strategy document that clearly outlines the PMO's role in driving strategic outcomes. Use language that ties the PMO to organisational success – e.g. enabling delivery of the corporate strategy, improving public service outcomes, managing enterprise risk, etc. Get this endorsed by top management to formally expand the PMO's remit beyond administration.

Invest in skills and credibility:
Build the PMO team's skills in business and strategy areas. Update PMO job profiles to emphasise these higher-value competences. One recommendation was to create a PMO career path that includes rotations in operations or strategy roles.

Promote successes and value-add:
Make it a point to regularly communicate PMO achievements in terms that matter to executives and service leads. One participant noted, people will "trust our advice now... they know we add value" – but only if they're made aware of that value.

Align with strategy processes:
Integrate PMO activities with the strategic planning cycle. For example, ensure the PMO provides data and recommendations during annual business planning or budgeting about which projects to start/stop (portfolio prioritisation input). If possible, have the PMO facilitate or have a representative attend strategy board meetings.

Challenge Three: Project Management Capability Gaps

Many emergency-service PMOs grapple with highly variable project management (PM) capability in their organisations.

The summit frequently raised the issue of the "accidental project manager" or "occasional project manager" – staff who find themselves managing projects with little or no formal training. In hospitals, police forces, or fire services, subject-matter experts are often thrust into project roles without a project management background. This leads to inconsistent practices and a heavy reliance on the PMO to guide or fix basic project work.

Low PM maturity puts a strain on the PMO, as it often has to step in as an ad-hoc trainer, coach, and sometimes rework poorly formed plans. Projects run by unskilled managers are more likely to experience delays, budget issues, or failure to realise benefits, undermining the organisation's strategic objectives. For the PMO, continually firefighting (no pun intended!) these issues limits its ability to be proactive on higher-value activities.

Some organisations assume "anyone can manage a project" and with a lack of clear performance measures for project managers, underperformance isn't identified until a project is in deep trouble.

Stand Out Action!

Create a "minimum viable project manager" checklist.

What's Working?

Fundamental training programs: Several PMOs introduced "back to basics" training for all project leads covering planning, risk management, scheduling, and other core skills. Short in-house courses, online modules, or targeted workshops helped establish a baseline understanding.

Communities of practice and peer learning: Informal knowledge-sharing was highlighted as very effective in raising capability. Many attendees have established Communities of Practice (CoP) for project and programme managers, which serve as a safe space to discuss challenges and share tips.

One-on-one coaching ("critical friend" model): A powerful model cited was embedding PMO staff as "trusted advisors" or "critical friends" to project managers. This shoulder-to-shoulder coaching not only upskills the PM, it builds trust and ensures issues are caught early.

Clear methodology and check-ins: Establishing what "good" looks like for project management in the organisation is key. Several PMOs created simple project management handbooks or playbooks that define standard expectations (e.g. every project needs a milestone plan, a risk log, defined benefits, etc.) and templates. Regular check-ins or stage gate reviews by the PMO help reinforce these standards and identify who needs extra support

Tool-driven consistency: Introducing common PPM tools or at least central templates can force a degree of consistency in practice. However, they cautioned that the tool alone isn't a silver bullet – the PMO still had to follow up with conversations and coaching.

Challenge Three: Project Management Capability Gaps

What's Not Working?

Pockets of inconsistency: Despite frameworks and training, many organisations still have "patchy PM capability across the organisation". Different departments - or even different PMOs within the same service - use different approaches and terminology. This inconsistency means lessons learned in one area aren't easily transferred to another, and the quality of project management remains hit-or-miss depending on who is running a project. PMO leaders find it hard to tell if a problem is due to an individual PM's skill or a systemic issue, because practices vary so widely. A unified approach (common language, templates, and expectations) is still a work in progress in many places.

Promoting without preparing: A cultural issue noted was that people are often promoted or assigned to project roles without the necessary training. In the rush to launch a new initiative or fill a vacancy, organisations might assume "*anyone can manage a project*". The result can be struggling projects and disillusioned staff. One PMO manager mentioned there were "no clear performance measures" for project managers in their organisation – so underperformance isn't identified until a project is in deep trouble. By then, the accidental PM is overwhelmed and the PMO is in emergency rescue mode. This reactive approach perpetuates the capability gap. It also devalues the PM profession.

Over-reliance on process over people: Some learned that simply mandating templates and processes doesn't guarantee understanding or competence. As one attendee put it, "Tools alone don't fix capability issues; conversations and facilitation do." PMOs that just issue thick methodology documents or enforce template completion often find the forms filled out with minimal effort or copied from old projects – i.e. compliance without comprehension. Without accompanying dialogue, coaching, and feedback, a purely documentation-based approach fails to change behavior.

Workload vs. learning tension: Another challenge is that many "accidental PMs" are doing project management off the side of their desk – they have day jobs in policing or healthcare. Taking time for training or mentoring can conflict with their operational duties. Some PMOs noted that even when training is offered, attendance is patchy due to workload.

Actions PMOs Can Take

Implement a formal competency framework: Use a structured competency framework (like House of PMO's or APM's) to assess project managers and create individual development plans. This helps move beyond ad-hoc training to a targeted approach. Having competency data can also support requests for training budget by showing the skill gaps objectively.

Avoid overengineering – keep it simple: Tailor your methodologies to the maturity level of the team. It's better to start with a simple project checklist or basic templates that everyone can handle, than to roll out an elaborate P3M3-level 4 process that people will circumvent. As maturity grows, you can incrementally introduce more sophistication.

Use early-phase "incubation": Before letting a major project launch under a novice manager, consider an incubation phase (or "Part 0" as one group called it). In this phase, the PMO works closely with the project lead on planning and setup, essentially walking them through the methodology on their actual project deliverables. It's akin to training wheels – by the time the project formally kicks off, the PM has a solid plan and has learned how to create one. This upfront investment can prevent common mistakes that occur when untrained staff jump straight to execution.

Create a PM academy or mentorship program: Some larger services are considering a "project management academy" – a series of required trainings and on-the-job checkpoints that anyone leading a project must go through.

Challenge Four: Prioritisation in an "Everything is Priority" Culture

"Everything is high priority" – many PMO professionals at the summit laughed ruefully at this phrase, because it rings so true across emergency services. In organisations driven by urgent public needs, political mandates, and reactive funding, it often feels impossible to say no to new initiatives.

The result is an overloaded portfolio where far more projects are running than resources truly allow, leading to staff burnout, missed deadlines, and projects competing for the same people's time. When everything is labeled top priority, effectively nothing is – because there is no focus.

Failure to prioritise can literally mean critical improvements (like new equipment or IT systems) are delayed while less important work consumes capacity. Instituting a ruthless and transparent prioritisation process is vital for both efficiency and staff wellbeing.

PMOs often must act as the conscience of the organisation, reminding leaders that choosing not to prioritise is a choice to overload and under-deliver.

Stand Out Action!

Force one explicit trade-off in every prioritisation conversation.

What's Working?

PMO as the "voice of realism": In a number of cases, the PMO took on the role of bringing data to the table to enable prioritisation. PMOs that prepared simple charts of resource allocation or facilitated workshops to rank initiatives by strategic value found that they could inject realism into discussions, helping leaders grasp the impossibility of doing it all. . Scoring models were also tried: some PMOs used criteria (e.g. compliance necessity, ROI, impact, risk) to score projects, which gave an objective basis to debate priorities.

New prioritisation techniques: Several attendees shared that simplistic approaches like asking everyone to label projects High/Medium/Low priority had failed (since most things ended up marked High. One service balanced benefits vs. effort scores; others established structured portfolio review panels that regularly vet and challenge project proposals. Using a variation of the MoSCoW method, helping shift the culture from doing everything to doing the most important things first.

Addressing cultural barriers: Prioritisation is as much a cultural challenge as an analytical one. In a few success stories, a Chief Officer openly acknowledged that people were overworked and that some projects would have to wait, which empowered the PMO to develop a staggered roadmap. Also, tackling "passion projects" – those pet initiatives that someone senior is emotionally invested in but which may not align to strategy – requires diplomacy.

Portfolio-level visualisation: A practical tool was creating a portfolio calendar or heatmap visible to all. By mapping out every major project and its timeline (for the year or next two years) on one page, clashes and crowding became evident. Seeing the big picture helped leadership agree to sequence and stagger projects.

Challenge Four: Prioritisation in an "Everything is Priority" Culture

What's Not Working?

Leaders avoiding hard choices: In some cases, even with data, leaders were reluctant to make prioritisation decisions. Culturally, saying "not this year" to a project can be seen as admitting defeat or risking that funding might not return. So everything gets a green light and the expectation is that "somehow it will all get done." This avoidance leads to portfolio bloat. Summit participants noted that a shift in mindset is needed at the top: choosing not to do something now is not failure, it's good governance (especially if it prevents many half-done projects). Without that mindset change, technical prioritisation exercises won't stick.

Hidden work and false priorities: A barrier encountered was that teams sometimes hide or re-label work to get it through. For example, if a formal project needs approval but an unofficial initiative can be done off the radar, managers might pursue the latter, leading to "stealth projects" consuming resources with no oversight. This is often the 'elephant in the room' - everybody knows but turns a 'blind eye' as it is too difficult to address.

Scoring systems misused: Some who tried numeric scoring models found they can be gamed or misused. For instance, if the criteria are too vague, every sponsor claims max benefits and minimal effort for their project (resulting in identical high scores). Or the scoring becomes an end in itself – a bureaucratic exercise divorced from reality. A lesson was that scoring needs facilitation and honesty to work; it's a conversation starter, not a definitive answer.

Resource allocation not aligning with priorities: Even after prioritisation on paper, some places failed to realign resources accordingly. Projects deemed lower priority continued sucking up specialist staff because there was no mechanism to pause or slow them. Without aligning workforce plans or contractor budgets to the chosen priorities, the exercise becomes theoretical, with no impact on or improvement in delivery.

Actions PMOs Can Take

Implement a two-stage prioritisation process: One recommendation was to have each department/service rank its own projects first, then bring those rankings to an executive portfolio board. This two-stage approach can be more politically palatable, as it forces trade-offs at the local level first (people sacrifice some of their own projects rather than feeling that "others" killed their project).

Formalize sequencing and "not now": Include a scheduling dimension in prioritisation decisions – not just which projects to do, but when to do them for optimal impact. The PMO should promote the idea that staggering initiatives and allowing breathers is a sign of good leadership, not weakness.

Develop a true portfolio view and roadmap: Invest time in creating a single, consolidated portfolio overview – whether via software or a physical board – that shows all projects, their timing, and status. Socialise this portfolio view widely; make it the basis of regular discussions with leadership. A motto from one table was "stop starting, start finishing". A transparent portfolio view helps drive that message home.

Quantify the cost of overload: Several attendees suggested putting hard numbers to the abstract problem of overload. One PMO presented to their board: "Last year we started 50 projects; 20 are still incomplete and staff sickness increased by X%. If we continue this, emergency response times will suffer."

Challenge Five: Complex Transformational Change

Emergency services are undertaking highly complex transformations – often involving multiple agencies, regions, and professional groups working together.

Examples include multi-force police collaborations on new technology platforms, ambulance services merging dispatch systems with hospitals, or integrated public safety programs spanning fire, police, health, and local government.

These transformations face layered regulatory, political, and regional pressures all at once. They cut across traditional silos, requiring coordination of many moving parts and stakeholder groups.

The PMO is challenged to provide structure and assurance amid this complexity and uncertainty. . Summit participants identified "complex change" as a top challenge because many felt existing project approaches were not sufficient to manage the scale and interdependencies involved.

"You absolutely must invest in planning and feasibility for multi-agency projects, even if sponsors are impatient to see progress."

Stand Out Action!

Build a single, shared "transformation blueprint" before delivery starts.

What's Working?

Integrated business change functions: Successful programmes combined strong PMO delivery with embedded change management. Dedicated business change roles focused on communication, training and engagement ensured people were ready to adopt new ways of working. When change teams were involved early, outcomes landed more effectively. Organisations that invested in Business Change Managers, Change Analysts and super users alongside the PMO reported higher adoption and smoother transitions.

Early and continuous end-user involvement: Involving end users from design through to delivery reduced resistance and rework. Advisory groups, co-design sessions and pilots helped ensure solutions reflected real operational needs. Continuous engagement – rather than one-off consultation – was especially important on long-running programmes or where staff turnover was high.

Relentless relationship-building across boundaries: Complex programmes relied heavily on trust and informal networks across agencies. Regular cross-organisation touchpoints, shared collaboration channels and informal problem-solving groups helped issues surface and resolve quickly. Investing in relationship-building supported alignment beyond formal governance structures.

Programme methodologies, applied pragmatically: Formal programme frameworks (such as MSP) helped manage scale and interdependencies by providing structure around vision, benefits and governance. However, participants stressed the need for flexibility. The most effective approaches applied programme principles without excessive bureaucracy – focusing on governance that enabled delivery rather than slowed it down.

Challenge Five: Complex Transformational Change

What's Not Working?

Rushing into delivery without proper discovery: Under pressure to act, some programmes moved straight into delivery without a robust discovery or feasibility phase. Skipping early design and validation led to fundamental issues surfacing late, including incompatible systems, missed stakeholder needs and costly rework. The consistent message was clear: cutting discovery short rarely saves time overall.

Lack of shared objectives across organisations: In multi-agency programmes, different partners often pursued their own priorities without a clearly agreed, shared vision. When objectives and benefits weren't aligned and formally signed off, programmes fragmented, scope crept and conflicts increased.

Treating change as a technical exercise: Several groups admitted that in past programmes, they "focused on the tech and forgot the people," resulting in low adoption, pushback, and the need to re-train or even re-implement. Not allocating enough resource to engagement, training, and cultural change was a frequent pitfall. For example, going live with a new process without sufficient frontline input or without adjusting existing workflows led to chaos and users reverting to old methods.

Too rigid or too uncontrolled: Some programmes followed fixed plans despite changing external conditions, while others suffered from constant scope changes with little discipline. In both cases, weak programme-level change control meant initiatives drifted, expanded unchecked, or lost relevance over time. Striking the right balance is hard. A pitfall mentioned was not having a clear change control process at the programme level – some morphed beyond recognition because every partner agency kept adding requirements. Establishing a strong programme governance (with a board that can actually say no to scope creep) was something several people felt was missing in programmes that struggled to achieve the intended outcomes.

Actions PMOs Can Take

Institute a rigorous Discovery/Initiation phase:
Build in a formal discovery phase (stage zero) for complex change, focused on feasibility, stakeholder alignment and design validation. Invest time upfront to surface constraints, test assumptions and agree a clear blueprint before delivery starts.

Create a coordinated executives coalition:
Establish a clear, active group of executive leads across all partner organisations. Keep them aligned on vision, benefits and decisions, and treat executive lead engagement as an ongoing activity - not a one-off appointment. One idea was to have a formal memorandum of understanding (MoU) between organisations.

Use agile approaches within a programme:
Apply iterative delivery where appropriate (pilots, phased rollouts, regional waves), while maintaining strong programme-level governance. Balance adaptability with clear oversight of benefits, dependencies and outcomes.

Make integration explicit and owned:
Assign clear responsibility for managing cross-programme and cross-agency changes and dependencies. This could be a specific role (programme integration manager) or the PMO itself. Maintain an integrated plan and risk view that focuses on interfaces, sequencing and points of failure - not just individual workstreams.

Challenge Six: Value for Money - Demonstrating PMO Value

In times of tight budgets and intense public scrutiny, every pound spent in emergency services must show value. PMOs, being support functions, often find themselves under "value for money" pressure – constantly having to justify their existence.

This is despite strong evidence that effective PMOs prevent costly project failure, inefficiency and rework.

The problem is visibility: PMO costs are easy to see, while the savings, risks avoided and benefits enabled often go unmeasured or unreported. When projects move into delivery or into 'business as usual' following delivery, without tracking outcomes, the PMO's contribution remains hidden.

To avoid being seen as expendable, PMOs must make their value explicit - in benefits realised, costs avoided and risks reduced - not just activity delivered.

PMOs stay funded by being "impossible to remove without the organisation feeling it"

Stand Out Action!

Track and publish one tangible saving the PMO creates each quarter.

What's Working?

Benefits management and tracking: PMOs that embedded benefits planning and follow-up reviews were able to produce clear evidence of value delivered. Requiring benefits owners, defined measures and post-implementation reviews shifted conversations from PMO cost to portfolio return. One PMO aggregated benefits across all projects in a year and reported: "We supported the achievement of £X in quantified benefits for £Y invested in projects, a Z% return." Presenting such a portfolio ROI is powerful for defending budgets.

Making cost avoidance explicit: Some PMOs captured value through risks avoided, poor projects stopped early and efficiencies created. Logging "saves" - such as reduced rework, avoided spend or time saved - helped demonstrate that the PMO returned more value than it cost. Even more directly, some PMOs track their own efficiencies: "We automated our reporting, saving 1 FTE worth of effort (which is ~£50k/year)" – and reported that as value-add.

Outcome-led portfolio reporting: Reporting that showed how projects contributed to strategic objectives helped leaders see PMO-enabled delivery as investment in outcomes, not administrative overhead. For example, one PMO produces a quarterly "benefits and outcomes scorecard" for the executive team, summarising how projects are contributing to strategic goals (e.g. "5 projects completed this quarter projected to reduce response times by 10% in region X" or "Programme Alpha delivered £2m in cost avoidance")

Senior leader advocacy: Where executives understood and openly referenced the PMO's contribution, credibility increased quickly. Visible endorsement reinforced the PMO's role as a value-enabler rather than a cost centre. For instance, if a Chief Fire Officer tells their board "We couldn't have delivered this new station rollout without our PMO – they kept us on track," it carries weight.

Challenge Six: Value for Money - Demonstrating PMO Value

What's Not Working?

Lack of metrics: Many PMOs still do not track KPIs or value metrics for their own function (or for project outcomes). If you're not measuring benefits, you can't demonstrate them. In some cases, projects "finish" and move on with no one ever checking back, as noted earlier. That leaves a void of evidence when PMO value is questioned. Also, not measuring PMO performance (like project success rate improvements, customer satisfaction of PMO services, or even "decrease in uncontrolled chaos".) means the PMO can only argue value in vague terms.

PMO seen as an overhead cost centre: In accounting terms, PMO budget is often grouped under HQ or admin costs, which are target areas for cuts. If finance and leadership don't attribute any savings or revenue to the PMO, it's perpetually a cost to minimise. This accounting mindset is hard to change, but some places have started to allocate benefits to the PMO influence (for example, crediting the PMO in part for a programme that delivered efficiency savings). Not doing so leaves the PMO in a defensive position.

Communication gap: Even when PMOs are delivering value, if they fail to communicate it in the language of the organisation's decision-makers, it falls flat. Technical PMO reports full of project jargon won't sway a CFO, for instance. All too often PMOs talk about tasks completed (e.g. "ran 5 workshops, published 10 reports") rather than outcomes achieved. This can reinforce the "busy but are they adding value?" challenge. Tailoring communication to emphasise outcomes and using financial/strategic framing is crucial, as mentioned above, and often lacking.

Short-term cuts over long-term thinking: Leadership sometimes makes cuts in the PMO in reaction to immediate budget pressure without understanding the long-term cost. PMOs struggle to combat this if they don't have data to show the negative impact (in ££s) on project delivery and benefits realisation. For example, if a PMO can say "cutting one PMO officer saves £50k, but risks £500k in project waste," that's compelling - but often that analysis isn't prepared. Without it, PMOs fall victim to short-term cost-cutting logic that ignores the bigger picture.

Actions PMOs Can Take

Establish a benefits-led culture: Champion a benefits realisation framework within the organisation. Insist that every project define clear, measurable benefits at the start, and that those are tracked through to fruition. The PMO can offer to own this benefits tracking process (since project teams often disband after delivery). Remember it's also important to recognise the role of the sponsor here too!

Quantify PMO value-add: Develop some PMO performance indicators linked to enabling project delivery and benefits realisation.

Regular value reporting: Consider creating a PMO annual (or quarterly) report focused on value and improvements. Include sections like "This year's project benefits at a glance," "Improvements facilitated by the PMO," and case studies of successes.

Link PMO goals to strategic goals: Ensure the PMO's objectives explicitly tie to the organisation's strategy. For instance, if the police service has a strategic goal to "Improve emergency response times by 10%," the PMO might have an objective to "Implement portfolio level scheduling and benefits tracking to improve visibility and control, enabling achieve projects that reduce response times" – and then measure that.

Be proactive in cost-saving ideas: At the summit, PMOs discussed adopting their own innovations (like AI tools for note-taking to save admin time) and then highlighting those savings. When the PMO is seen as actively finding ways to save money or time, it becomes an enabler of efficiency, exactly what executives want during tight times.

Challenge Seven: Change Fatigue and Sustaining a Change-Ready Culture

"Here we go again." This phrase encapsulates change fatigue, which emerged as a pervasive issue across emergency services. After years of continuous reforms, restructuring, budget cuts, and new initiatives, staff on the frontline are simply exhausted and skeptical of each new change.

Such fatigue undercuts project success: it's harder to get buy-in for projects, adoption of new systems falters, and well-conceived changes can fail because of low morale or pushback.
The operational tempo in emergency services is high (with crisis-driven priorities like the pandemic), leaving little bandwidth for absorbing change.
This challenge of sustaining a healthy change culture, where continuous improvement is embraced and people have the capacity to adapt, underpins many other challenges (executive sponsorship, benefits realisation, etc., all hinge on people adopting the changes). Addressing change fatigue is critical to avoid organisational stagnation and burnout.

"Change fatigue is polite language. What people are really saying is: stop breaking things and calling it transformation."

Stand Out Action!

Pause one initiative to create space for another to land properly.

What's Working?

Providing context and the "big picture": Helping staff see why a change matters in terms of the larger mission can make it more meaningful. Some organisations use systems-thinking workshops to show how different parts of the service connect, and how a change in one area links to better outcomes for the public. Several organisations reported that when they took the time to connect the dots for staff, it reduced the "not my problem" mindset and generated more support.

Co-creation with frontline staff: A very powerful approach has been co-designing changes with those who have to implement them. Summit examples included dedicated workshops where paramedics and call centre staff helped design a new ambulance rota system, and police officers were invited to trial bodycam processes and suggest adjustments. When staff feel a change is done with them rather than to them, acceptance is far higher.

Safe spaces for honest conversations: One innovative idea was to create more informal, supportive environments to discuss change, acknowledging the emotional toll. For instance, taking discussions out of formal meeting rooms and into a relaxed setting (like a café style session or an offsite retreat) where staff feel more comfortable voicing concerns. One group described holding "wellbeing conversations" about upcoming changes – essentially listening sessions where people could vent about how past changes affected them and what they worry about. By removing hierarchy and immediate work pressures from the conversation, these sessions "became more honest and human," leading to better mutual understanding and trust.

Emphasising "What's in it for me": PMOs and change teams found that framing communications around personal impact (not just organisational benefits) improved receptiveness. It's not that staff don't care about the big mission, but when they are fatigued, they primarily want to know how a change will affect their daily work.

Challenge Seven: Change Fatigue and Sustaining a Change-Ready Culture

What's Not Working?

Endless cycles with little payoff: Staff get most cynical when they endure wave after wave of change that "doesn't actually change much." Repeated transformation initiatives that fail to deliver visible improvements breed deep cynicism. One participant described it as a "carousel of restructures" where people just keep their heads down until it passes. Breaking this cycle requires actually delivering some successes (however small) and acknowledging past failures openly and learning from them. Not doing so practically guarantees resistance.

Copy-paste communications: A subtle but important factor: if change communications come in the same old corporate tone and template as always, jaded staff tune out or react negatively. Some services are trying more authentic, informal communications or using respected frontline champions to convey messages instead of top executives, to reset the narrative.

Overload with no respite: The fundamental cause of fatigue is too many changes landing on people simultaneously. Several groups observed that their organisations never paced change - initiatives were stacked on initiatives with zero breathing room. This constant churn leads not only to fatigue but to change immunity - people just stop caring because it's relentless. A lack of central portfolio coordination (as discussed in prioritisation) is a key contributor to this. Without deliberate scheduling to ensure downtime between waves, staff remain in a permanent state of transition, which is exhausting and unsustainable.

"Checking out" and passive resistance: One manifestation of extreme fatigue is that some employees, especially those nearing retirement or just burned out, mentally check out of change efforts. They might nod along but do the bare minimum to adopt the new processes, figuring they'll outlast this change. This silent resistance is hard to tackle because it's not open protest - it's more like apathy. If a sizeable minority of staff operate this way, changes never fully embed. It's a symptom of long-term fatigue and disillusionment. Without addressing underlying morale and convincing people that "this time will be different," they may quietly undermine new initiatives.

Actions PMOs Can Take

Institute portfolio-level change management: As noted earlier, maintain a portfolio view of all change initiatives affecting the workforce. Use this to pace and sequence changes sensibly. Formally schedule "blackout periods" with no major changes (e.g. around holidays or critical operational periods). If multiple changes must happen, stagger their rollouts by region or function. Having a change calendar discussed at leadership level makes it a conscious decision to add something new (i.e. "what do we delay if we start this now?").

Gain leadership agreement on pacing: Senior leaders must openly agree that not everything can happen at once, and empower the PMO or change governance to say "not now" when capacity is maxed.

Apply change management models: Use established change models to guide support for people through transitions. Several participants specifically mentioned using models like ADKAR (Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement) and the Kübler-Ross Change Curve to understand and address staff emotions during change. One PMO said they map stakeholder sentiments and use ADKAR checklists to ensure no stage is neglected – "do people truly understand why this is happening? do they have the desire to change?".

Visibly use feedback to adjust: Close the feedback loop with staff. If people express certain pain points about change, and you have the ability to alleviate them (even minor tweaks), do it and announce it.

Challenge Eight: Stakeholder Engagement and "Not Invented Here" Syndrome

Emergency services projects often affect a wide array of stakeholders - frontline staff, support departments, partner agencies, often the public. Effective stakeholder engagement is critical to project success.

If key stakeholders (internal or external) aren't properly engaged, projects can face hidden landmines: lack of cooperation, end-user rejection of new tools, or active blocking of changes. One specific cultural challenge highlighted was the "Not Invented Here" syndrome, where the stakeholder groups affected by the change, resist solutions that come from outside their group or were developed without their input.

In multi-agency initiatives, each organisation might distrust something championed by another service. This syndrome leads to great ideas falling flat simply because of their source. Therefore, beyond the merits of the project itself, how it's introduced and who is involved in shaping it determine whether stakeholders embrace or reject it.

PMOs struggle when senior stakeholders don't follow processes, skip updates, or avoid decision-making.

Stand Out Action!

Involve sceptical stakeholders in shaping one decision they normally resist.

What's Working?

Continuous engagement (not one-off): A strong theme was that engagement must be ongoing throughout the project lifecycle. Many initiatives do an initial consultation, then retreat to develop solutions in isolation. By the time they re-engage, people or priorities have shifted. Successful teams maintain regular touchpoints through design workshops, prototype demos, update briefings, and feedback at key stages.

Structured roles like change champions and super-users: Several organisations formalised engagement by appointing champions from within stakeholder groups. These individuals act as two-way bridges - raising concerns back to the project while advocating for it locally. Peer influence was seen as more effective than management messaging, with one police PMO noting that respected officers helped turn scepticism into acceptance. Organisations using this approach reported better adoption and fewer issues.

Post-implementation follow-ups: Engagement shouldn't stop at go-live. Running post-implementation reviews (for example at 2, 4, and 6 months) helped embed change and confirm benefits were being realised. Project delivery frameworks should include post project activities as a matter of course.

Early wins and shared credit: When a project involves multiple groups, securing an early win in one area and publicising it can create positive momentum. It's crucial, however, to share credit with those on the ground. One service piloted a new equipment checkout system at a single station; when it improved efficiency, they put out a story highlighting how that station's input made the project a success. This made others more receptive, seeing peers recognised as co-creators of success (as opposed to HQ taking all credit). Fostering a narrative of shared success ("we did this together") counters the Not Invented Here bias.

Challenge Eight: Stakeholder Engagement and "Not Invented Here" Syndrome

What's Not Working?

Designing in isolation: As touched on in the change fatigue and this section's why, attempting to design a solution in a silo and then throwing it over the wall to users is a recipe for rejection. The lesson is clear: lack of stakeholder involvement in design leads to solutions that don't fit - practically and psychologically.

One-way communication: Engagement is often mistaken for simply broadcasting to stakeholders (e.g. roadshows, emails) without truly listening from stakeholders. If communication is a one-way push – "here's what's coming, get ready" – people don't feel engaged; they feel managed. This can breed resentment or apathy, especially if past communications glossed over difficulties.

Ignoring local knowledge and context: Frontline stakeholders often have deep tacit knowledge of what will or won't work on the ground. Projects that ignore this and impose uniform solutions can backfire. For example, a scheduling system that didn't account for a fire station's unique shift swap practices caused so much friction that the station lobbied to opt out. The project team hadn't realized that a "small" local practice was actually crucial to daily operations. By not engaging those stakeholders early, they missed a context detail that later almost derailed the project. This ties back to Not Invented Here – if the central team appears clueless about local realities, locals will distrust the whole initiative.

Stakeholder fatigue: Stakeholders themselves can experience engagement fatigue. If every project constantly asks the same small group of end-users for input, they burn out or disengage. It's important to broaden the base of engagement (rotate who you consult, ensure diverse representation) and to make efficient use of stakeholders' time. A complaint sometimes is "we gave a lot of input but not sure what happened with it." If people invest time in engagement but don't see tangible outcomes from it, they may be less willing next time. Closing the loop ("You said, we did") is vital to avoid engagement fatigue.

Actions PMOs Can Take

Map stakeholders thoroughly and update the map: Ensure projects start with a robust stakeholder analysis – support the PM in identifying all groups impacted, their influence, their needs, and potential concerns. Don't treat this as a static document; update it as new stakeholders emerge or situations change.

Develop a stakeholder engagement plan (with feedback loops): Support the development of a formal plan that outlines how and when each key stakeholder group will be involved or communicated with at each project stage. Plan feedback loops - not just presentations, but workshops, surveys, pilot tests, etc., where stakeholders can actively shape outcomes. Ensure owners are assigned to each engagement activity (often PMO or change team members).

Leverage existing forums and relationships: Sometimes there are existing networks (e.g. a Nurses Committee, a Police Federation meeting, a Fire Station Managers forum) – tap into these for engagement rather than always creating new meetings.

Customise communication for each audience: Avoid one-size-fits-all messaging. Craft communications that address what each stakeholder cares about. Frontline staff might get a very practical "here's how this will make your day better" message with opportunity to ask questions, whereas senior executives might get a strategic "here's how this helps us meet our targets" briefing.

Other Challenges on the Horizon

Not all challenges discussed during the Blue Light PMO Summit made it to the top of the priority list but several still sparked meaningful conversation around the tables. These themes may not feel urgent today, but they're gaining traction and could reshape how PMOs in emergency services operate in the years ahead.

AI and Automation

While not a hot-button issue for most attendees, artificial intelligence (AI) was acknowledged as an area of potential and uncertainty. Some PMOs are experimenting with AI tools for reporting, forecasting, and identifying delivery patterns, but confidence is low. The general feeling? "*We know it's coming, but we don't know how to use it yet.*"

PMOs can begin by:

- Exploring AI features in existing PPM tools
- Running small pilots for report automation
- Upskilling teams on data literacy and tech trends

A major theme in from the summit is the use of Copilot and Power Automate to handle high-volume data analysis and routine reporting tasks.
By automating the "heavy lifting" of data collection, PMOs believe they can provide better strategic value to senior leadership.

Agile Delivery Methods

Agile came up frequently, but more as a background shift than a headline concern. PMOs shared frustrations around hybrid working environments, dual delivery models, and mismatched expectations from agile vs. traditional governance. The challenge isn't the method, it's embedding the mindset.

What helps:

- Building stronger relationships with product owners and delivery teams
- Supporting flow, stability, and dependencies—rather than dictating delivery styles
- Creating visibility into agile team capacity without micromanaging

Data and Digital Maturity

Several PMOs shared ongoing pain around fragmented data, poor tooling, and inconsistent visibility. Many said they're still reliant on spreadsheets or siloed systems, limiting their ability to forecast, allocate, or even explain delivery performance clearly.

PMOs want to be insight-driven, but they're only as good as the data they can access.

Immediate actions include:

- Establishing a central data source for project and resource information
- Championing data quality at source (e.g. planning inputs, resource updates)
- Leveraging existing tools better before buying new ones

An Open Letter to Senior Leaders in Emergency Services

To Chief Officers, Executives and Senior Leaders across our Emergency Services Organisations,

In today's climate of rising demand, evolving public expectations and persistent financial pressure, the role of the PMO (Project, Programme and Portfolio Office) has never been more critical. You are expected to deliver transformation at pace, protect operational resilience, and ensure every pound invested delivers real public value.

A strong, well-supported PMO is one of your most effective enablers in doing exactly that.

Across the blue light sector, PMOs are evolving - moving from administrative support to strategic partners at the heart of decision-making and delivery. When positioned well, they bring structure to complexity, turn strategy into action, and protect investment in change by ensuring the right work is delivered, by the right people, at the right time.

However, this report highlights a consistent set of challenges holding that potential back.

At the 2025 Blue Light PMO Summit, professionals from police, fire, ambulance, health and central government shared a clear message: delivery pressure is increasing, but capability is not keeping pace. PMOs are grappling with unclear mandates, limited capacity, inconsistent standards, change fatigue, and growing portfolios that outstrip available resources. Too often, they are brought in late, under-sponsored, or expected to absorb risk without the authority to manage it.

These are not PMO problems. They are leadership problems - and leadership opportunities.

Addressing them requires visible sponsorship, clearer strategic alignment, and deliberate investment in PMO capability. When this happens, PMOs strengthen delivery confidence, reduce risk, and create a clear line of sight from board-level intent to frontline impact.

This report distils the lived experience of your colleagues and peers. It highlights where PMOs are struggling, where they are succeeding, and what is required to move from coping to performing. We encourage you to use it as a prompt for reflection and action - not as something to file away.

Because when the PMO thrives, delivery improves.
And when delivery improves, so does the organisation.

Signed,
The Blue Light PMO Community
On behalf of the House of PMO

Summary

The Blue Light PMO Summit surfaced a set of challenges that are widely shared across emergency services. While the operating contexts differ, the pressures facing PMOs are remarkably consistent.

PMOs are working in environments shaped by:

- Constant operational demand
- Public and political scrutiny
- Financial constraint
- Increasing scale and complexity of change

Against this backdrop, many PMOs are expected to deliver transformation without the authority, sponsorship or capacity required to do so effectively.

What we heard most often

Across the summit discussions, several challenges repeatedly dominated conversations:

• **Executive sponsorship remains fragile**
PMOs continue to struggle to secure visible, accountable sponsorship for themselves and projects within the portfolio. Where sponsorship is absent or inconsistent, PMOs lack the mandate to prioritise work, challenge decisions, or sustain momentum.

• **The strategic PMO is still not the default**
Although progress is being made, many PMOs are still perceived as administrative or compliance functions. Where PMOs are operating strategically, that position is often down to certain individuals influence rather than embedded organisational intent.

• **Capability gaps put pressure on delivery**
Inconsistent project and change management capability - particularly the reliance on “accidental project managers” - increases delivery risk and pulls PMOs into reactive support roles.

• **Prioritisation remains a major pain point**
An “everything is a priority” culture leads to overloaded portfolios, stretched resources and reduced delivery confidence. Without clear trade-offs, focus is lost.

• **Change fatigue is real and growing**
Continuous transformation, with little space to absorb change, is taking its toll on frontline teams. Fatigue and scepticism are now significant risks to successful adoption.

Despite these challenges, the summit also highlighted strong examples of progress:

- PMOs shifting from reporting status to providing insight
- Improved prioritisation through clearer portfolio visibility
- Capability building through coaching, communities of practice and simple standards
- Stronger engagement through co-design and sustained stakeholder involvement
- Increased focus on benefits, outcomes and value for money

These examples show that progress is possible, even in the most pressured environments.

Conclusions

The discussions at the Blue Light PMO Summit reinforced a clear message: PMOs are a critical enabler of effective change in emergency services.

When PMOs are:

- Clearly mandated
- Actively sponsored
- Involved early
- Properly resourced

they strengthen delivery confidence, reduce risk and help organisations focus on the work that matters most.

Where these conditions are absent, PMOs are left managing complexity without authority, absorbing risk without influence, and justifying their existence instead of maximising their impact.

A leadership opportunity

The challenges outlined in this report are not issues for PMOs to solve alone. They are leadership challenges and leadership opportunities.

Addressing them requires deliberate choices to:

- Prioritise realistically and visibly
- Pace change to protect people and outcomes
- Invest in capability, not just delivery
- Position PMOs as strategic partners, not administrative support

Moving forward together

Perhaps the most powerful outcome of the summit was the sense of shared experience. PMO professionals left knowing they are not alone and that many of the challenges they face are systemic, not personal or local.

This report is intended as a starting point, not a full stop. It provides a shared reference for reflection, discussion and action - within PMOs, across leadership teams, and between organisations.

By continuing the conversation and working together, the blue light PMO community can strengthen its collective impact and better support the critical services it enables.

Continuing the Conversation

This report is not intended to be read and filed away. It is a prompt for reflection and action.

PMO leaders and teams are encouraged to:

- Use the insights in this report to start constructive conversations with senior leaders
- Reflect on where their PMO is currently adding value — and where it needs greater support
- Consider how sponsorship, prioritisation, capability and change capacity are addressed within their organisation
- Connect with peers across the blue light sector to share learning and practical solutions

The strength of the Blue Light PMO Summit lay in the sense of community it created. By continuing to share experiences and learn from one another, PMOs across emergency services can strengthen their collective impact and better support the vital services they enable.

Our sincere thanks go to everyone who contributed to the success of the summit and the creation of this report, including:

- All speakers and panellists for sharing candid experiences and lessons learned
- Roundtable facilitators who guided thoughtful and constructive discussions
- Attendees who openly shared challenges, ideas and practical approaches
- Our event partners and hosts for their support in bringing the summit to life, many thanks to AtkinsRéalis.

Your willingness to share what is really happening on the ground has helped create a resource that reflects the realities of delivery in emergency services.

HOUSE OF PMO™
HOME TO PMO PROFESSIONALS

Join the House of PMO to stay connected and continue to learn, share and collaborate with PMO professionals across emergency services.
www.houseofpmo.com

AtkinsRéalis

AtkinsRéalis brings deep experience in PMO and complex change delivery. Supporting organisations to turn strategy into sustainable outcomes.
www.atkinsrealis.com

To explore or make use of any content from this report, please get in touch with the House of PMO / www.houseofpmo.com

HOUSE OF PMO
HOME TO PMO PROFESSIONALS

AtkinsRéalis

Continue the conversation by sharing insights, experiences and challenges with peers across the Blue Light PMO community.

© 2026 House of PMO. All rights reserved.
No part of this report may be reproduced
or distributed without prior permission.

BLUE LIGHT
PMO SUMMIT