



Developing Outstanding Project Managers

Highways England is a new government company with a big brief: to operate, maintain and modernise the strategic road network in the interests of customers.

Formerly, the Highways Agency, the transition from a Government Agency to an ex-civil service (but still Government owned) company has generated its own challenges, not least the need to attract and retain leading project management talent.

Highways England manages the strategic road network, covering 3% of roads in England, yet it carries around a third of all road traffic in England, employs around 3,800 staff and is responsible for the safety of 4 million drivers that use the strategic road network each day.

“We have to excel in a very competitive market and work closely with Government, the Office of Road and Rail Regulation, our supply chain and our customers to deliver the Government’s vision as set out in the Roads Investment Strategy (RIS)” explains Gail Fleming, Head of Centre of Excellence, Highways England

This brief equates to more than 100 major infrastructure improvements programmed over the next 5 years, covering construction, technology, safety, and the environmental impact over the road network. It is not something that Highways England can deliver alone, and there is a need to build strong links with industry through the supply chain and professional bodies to ensure key performance indicators are met and the schemes remain commercially viable.

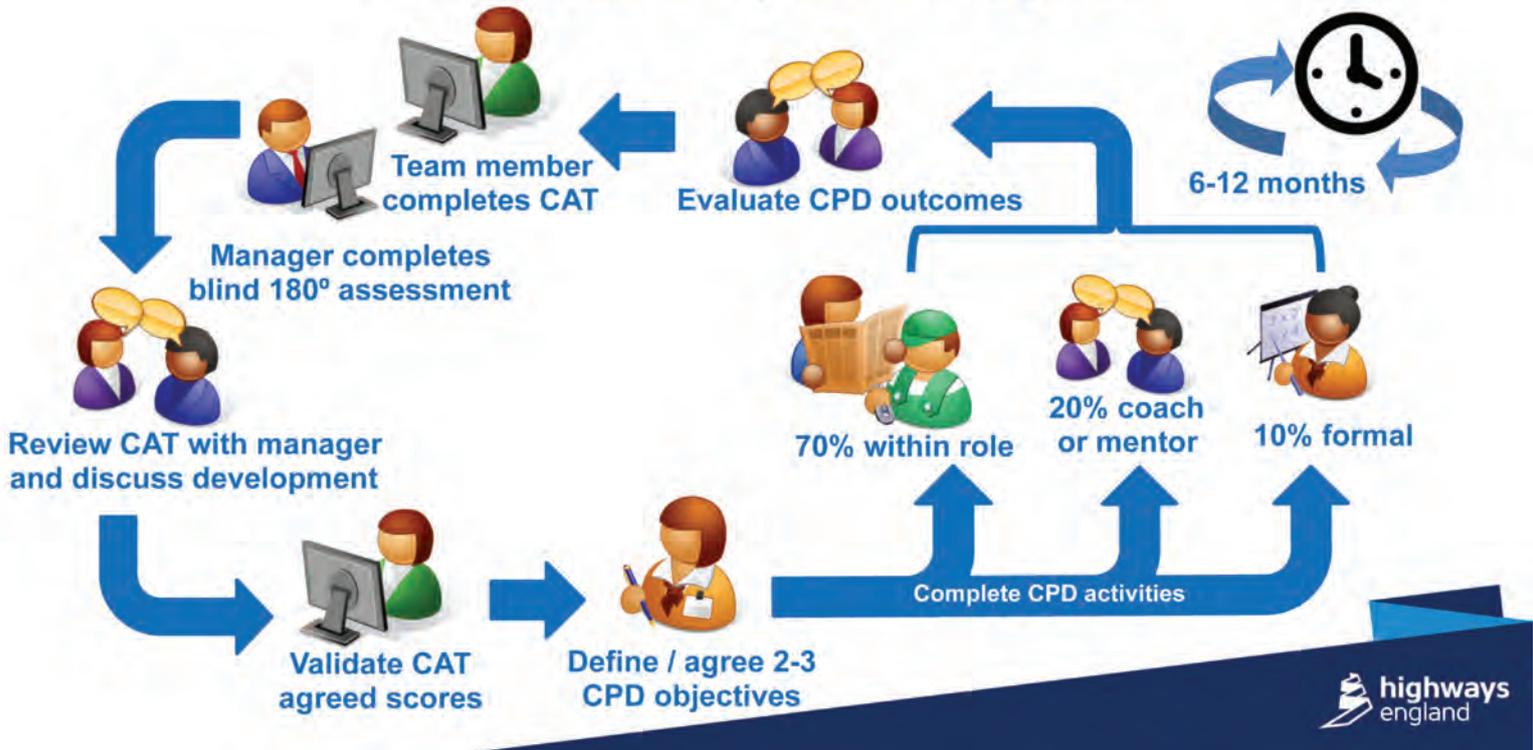
“Having leading industry experts and competent project professionals managing our programmes and projects is key to us meeting our targets set by Government. We need to have home-grown expertise and become an intelligent client so we can build stronger relationships with our suppliers that ensure we work together to effectively manage risks and deliver every scheme on time, on budget and at the right quality, ultimately realising the benefits to our customers,” explains Justine Cothill, Centre of Excellence, Highways England

So, in the last 12 months, the COE team in Highways England has worked closely with the Association of Project Management and leading training provider QA to define and implement a defined career path and development strategy for their project management community of over 1,100 project professionals.

The first step was to define what ‘good’ looked like for each of the project, programme and specialist roles and so, rather than try and create their own competence framework, Highways England worked with QA to tailor the APM’s Competence Framework.

“Using an industry standard framework that is internationally recognised, we were able to quickly define our roles by including some additional competencies that focussed on what we want and need for the future, for example specific Health and Safety requirements and our stringent governance processes. We have defined what ‘good’ looks like, our ambition now is for staff to be

P30 Development cycle



confident they are an expert - or training and developing to be an expert - within their project discipline," says Justine. The defined roles and competencies were then rolled out across the project management community using QA's COMPASS online tool. A self-assessment followed, conducted by a line manager assessment and scores validated through a face to face interview, helping to identify and define development objectives through CPD.

This exercise helped Highways England to understand their current and future needs for project and programme leadership and highlighted the need to attract and retain project professionals by providing the developmental and professional support to build their career over the long term.

The company already has established apprentice and graduate programmes covering business administration, civil engineering, accountancy and other professions. The difference this year is that the Highways Agency is targeting recruitment for its Project Management graduate and apprentice programmes. The agency will be in a position to track and manage their development using COMPASS, build their development plans and align them to in-house experts who can pass on knowledge and experience, coach and develop the skills needed.

"We have to build our capability for our specific skills gaps, and make and develop our own talent to secure our future project delivery capability. We need leading experts in risk,

benefits and PMO management for example. Identifying talented staff early in their project management career and offering exciting development opportunities will mean that Highways England is not only a great place to work, but also a place where you can build your project management career," says Justine.

Training and development are vital to motivating and retaining staff and Highways England has mapped out a programme of growth through formal qualifications, advanced level masterclasses and workshop sessions that focus on specific capability requirements and competence areas.

Identifying where the existing experts are in the business is crucial to success and a key benefit of the COMPASS assessment process. Plans are underway to develop experienced project leaders into coaches and mentors, supporting the wider Highways England project, programme and portfolio community. This ensures that the years of experience and personal networks are not lost as staff retire, but instead inherited by a new generation of project professionals.

If you are a graduate and interested in applying for our project management programme and other vacancies at Highways England visit <http://recruitment.highways.gov.uk>

If you wish to find out more about how QA's COMPASS online assessment tool can help you understand the competence of your project professionals visit: <http://compass.qa.com>