



WHITE PAPER

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Governing AI in Projects:

Why the PMO Should Take the Lead

The PMO's emerging role in embedding AI governance, providing assurance and improving governance maturity in projects.

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by Emanuela Giangregorio | August 2026

Executive Summary

The first [Pulse of AI Governance in Projects](#) report, published in Spring 2026, places most respondents at an early stage of AI governance maturity: a median score of 2.43 on a five-level scale. Project governance has not caught up with AI adoption. The data shows that 77% of respondents do not yet have a standardised approach to governing AI in projects. That gap, between what AI already does in projects and how well it is governed, is what this paper addresses.

This paper argues that the **Project Management Office (PMO)** is the right function to close that governance gap, primarily because AI governance in projects is a logical extension of what the PMO already owns: the organisation's project governance framework, the methods and templates, the assurance function and the lessons learned that feed continuous improvement.

The argument rests on three PMO responsibilities regarding AI governance:

- **Embed** AI governance into the existing project governance framework, so projects are not having to invent their own governance mechanisms.
- **Assure** AI-assisted project work, using a consistent set of questions across the project life cycle.
- **Improve** AI governance maturity in projects over time.

The [AI Project Governance Framework](#) (AIPGF) supplies the mechanism for all three responsibilities. What follows is the case for the PMO leading AI governance in projects, the three responsibilities that role comprises, and practical first steps a PMO lead can take.

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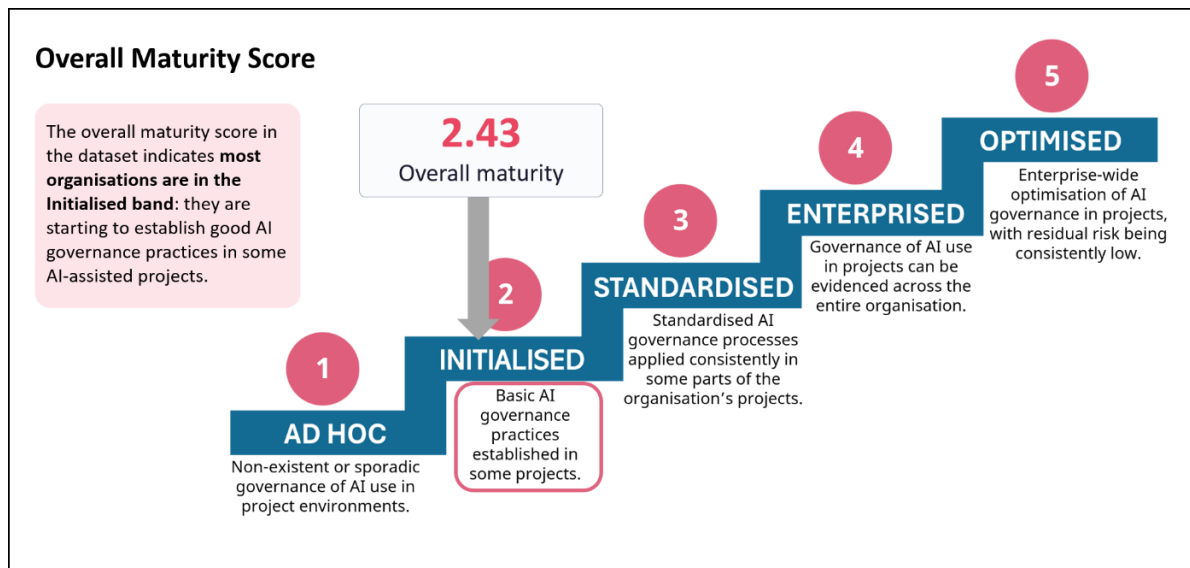
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The Governance Gap

Over the last three years, AI assistance has arrived in projects primarily in two ways:

1. Project teams using large language models such as Claude, ChatGPT, Copilot and Gemini.
2. AI assistance embedded in project management software tools people already use, such as Asana, Monday, Notion and Smartsheet¹.

The [Pulse of AI Governance in Projects](#) published in Spring 2026 provides the first structured read on how governance has kept pace.



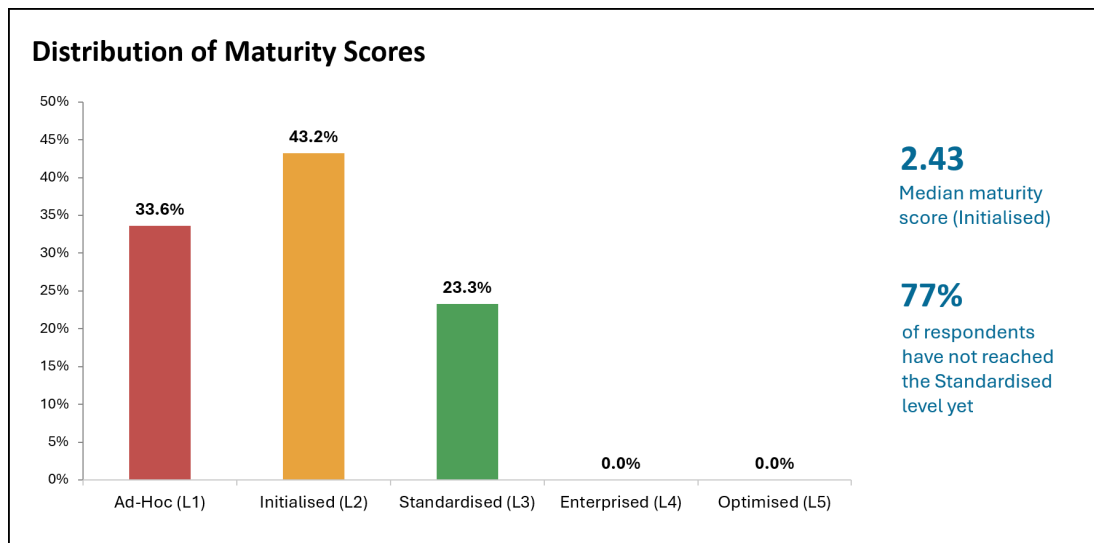
Source: *Pulse of AI Governance in Projects, Spring 2026*

¹ The tools named are examples only, not recommendations.

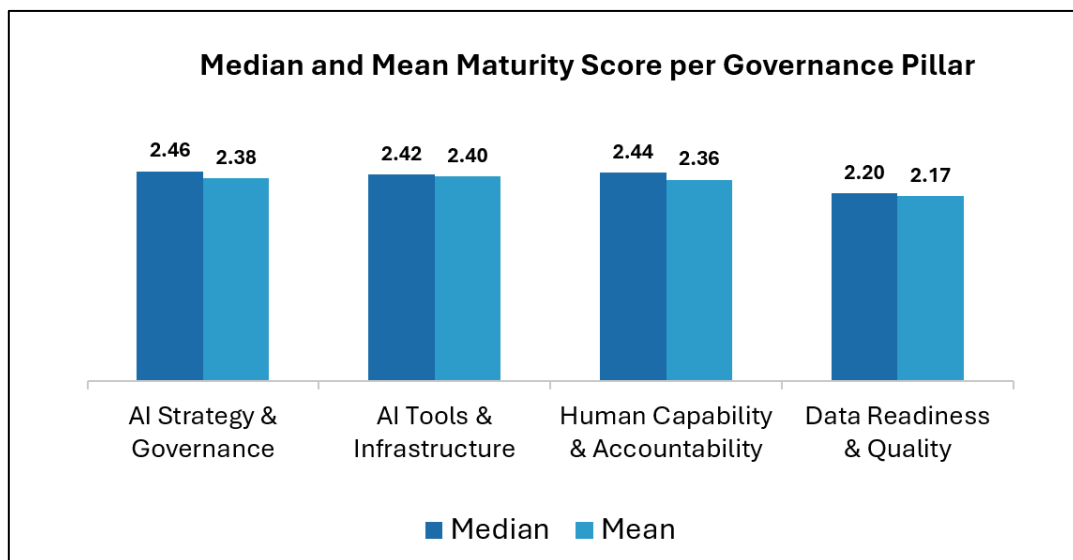
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Across 146 self-assessments spanning twelve sectors, collected between January and May 2026, the median maturity score was 2.43 on the five-level AIPG-CMM scale, placing the sample in the Initialised band.



No respondent reached Level 4 or 5, and more than three-quarters had not yet reached a standardised approach. Given that this group was self-selecting, a larger randomly sampled group would probably score lower.



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Whilst the weakest of the four governance pillars is Data Readiness and Quality, low maturity is not confined to one pillar. All four sit below the Standardised threshold, including Human Capability and Accountability. That pillar covers whether project teams are trained in responsible AI use, whether roles and responsibilities for AI governance are clear, and the degree to which humans maintain critical oversight of AI-generated outputs.

A [separate global survey](#) of 1,651 project and portfolio management professionals across seven countries, conducted by Dimensional Research for Smartsheet in late 2025, reached a similar conclusion: AI adoption is running ahead of the infrastructure and governance needed to support it.

The Pulse report findings, together with observed practice and wider evidence, show a governance gap:

AI assistance is in wide use across project delivery, while the arrangements to govern it are absent or inconsistent.

The consequence is not hypothetical, and it does not depend on an AI failure. When an executive, an auditor or a regulator asks for evidence that AI use across the organisation's projects is appropriately governed, the question lands with the function that owns project governance. Without embedded controls, the evidence cannot be provided.

Why the PMO

Closing the gap needs deliberate attention from a function that has reach across the project portfolio, an existing governance framework to extend, and a remit to assure delivery work. That points to the PMO.

A case can be made that AI governance (even in projects) should not sit with the PMO at all. One view places it with a Chief AI Officer or equivalent function. This view holds that AI is a specialist domain with its own risks, and a dedicated function should own AI

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governance end to end - projects should simply comply. Another view places it with a data governance function, on the grounds that most AI risk in projects traces back to the data the tools are fed. A third view places it with corporate risk or compliance functions, on the grounds that AI is a regulatory and reputational exposure to be managed through the organisation's existing risk apparatus, not through project delivery.

Each of these holds at organisational level. The AI policy, the approved-tools list, the ethical position and the regulatory strategy are organisational responsibilities, led by the executive or whoever holds the organisation's AI governance brief. However, a policy statement does not tell a project manager how to ensure - and show - that AI use across the project life cycle is ethical, efficient and effective.

Governing AI within projects is the work of applying the organisational-level direction consistently across the project portfolio: planning AI assistance, assessing data readiness, managing AI-related risk in delivery, maintaining human oversight of AI outputs, monitoring performance and capturing lessons. Those are project-level governance acts, assured across the project and programme portfolio, which sit within the PMO's existing remit. The relationship runs in both directions. Organisational AI governance expectations reach projects through the PMO, and what projects learn reaches the organisation the other way: a portfolio-level view of how those expectations perform in delivery, assembled from records the PMO already receives.

Consider what governing AI in projects requires: a consistent framework applied across projects, standard artefacts and the templates to build them, an assurance function that checks work against a standard, and a mechanism to capture lessons and improve project governance over time. Each of those is core PMO territory. The AIPGF names the PMO (or equivalent function) as custodian of the framework, responsible for maintaining the governance templates, providing guidance to project teams and ensuring consistent application across the portfolio.

| *The PMO already owns the machinery that AI governance needs.*

The PMO does not need to build a separate governance machine. It needs to extend an existing one.

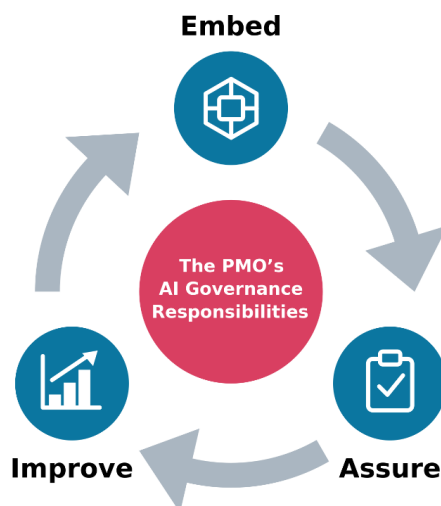
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PMO AI Governance Responsibilities

This paper proposes three PMO responsibilities for governing the use of AI in projects.

- **Embed.** Build AI governance into the existing project governance framework so that every AI-assisted project inherits it. Projects should not have to design their own AI governance from first principles. The PMO should update the standard project artefacts and controls so that AI assistance is planned, risk-assessed and reported as standard practice.
- **Assure.** Provide assurance that AI is being used in a way that maximises benefit and controls risk. Assurance is a set of questions folded into the gate reviews, stage assessments and reporting the PMO already runs, checking that AI-assisted work meets the standard the Embed responsibility has set.
- **Improve.** Raise the organisation's AI governance maturity over time. The PMO acts as custodian of the standard: maintaining templates, consolidating findings and recommendations from lessons learned, benchmarking maturity and setting improvement priorities. This is the responsibility that turns a set of controls into an AI governance capability that matures.



The three governance responsibilities depend on each other. Assurance cannot be provided without an embedded standard to assure against. Improvement is unlikely to

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take place without the findings and recommendations that assurance surfaces. And embedding, done once and not revisited, decays as regulations and AI-powered tools change.

Together, these PMO responsibilities form a continuous life cycle of resilient AI governance in projects.

How the AIPGF Supports Each Responsibility

The AIPGF is built to be embedded into any existing project management approach rather than run separately alongside it. It integrates with Agile, PRINCE2, PMBOK guidance and tailored in-house project governance frameworks. The AIPGF's three life cycle stages (Foundation, Activation and Evaluation) map onto the phases and processes a project governance framework already uses.

This design is what makes the AIPGF practical for PMOs: it extends their current project governance framework rather than replacing it.

Each PMO responsibility maps to a part of the AIPGF.

1. **Embed maps to the stages and their deliverables:** The Foundation, Activation and Evaluation stages carry a set of practical artefacts that the PMO can adopt and tailor as standard project deliverables:
 - **AI Assistance Plan** (Foundation): defines AI assistance objectives, approved tools, governance roles and constraints on use.
 - **Data Readiness Assessment** (Foundation): confirms the data behind the tools is accurate, complete, available and fit for context before use.
 - **AI Assistance Risk Register** (Foundation, maintained throughout): AI-related risks, either incorporated into the project risk register under an AI category or held separately.
 - **AI Usage Report** (Activation): a regular deliverable summarising how AI tools are being used, their effectiveness and any concerns to escalate.

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- **AI Lessons Learned (Evaluation):** lessons specific to AI use in the project, either incorporated into the project's lessons learned register under an AI category or held separately.

Embedding is the act of making these standard: part of the templates, the gate criteria and the definition of a governed project.

2. **Assure maps to the stage questions:** Assurance is based on asking a standard set of questions, and the three AIPGF stages supply them.

- **Foundation asks:** Has the project assessed:
 - a) Which AI tools will be used, and for what?
 - b) What data those tools need, and whether it is available, of adequate quality and approved for use?
 - c) What could go wrong in using AI, and what will be done about it?
- **Activation asks:** Can the project confirm:
 - a) The AI tools are being used as planned, and are adding value?
 - b) There is evidence of humans maintaining appropriate oversight of AI outputs?
 - c) AI-related risks are monitored throughout?
 - d) AI-related issues are identified, resolved and reported?
- **Evaluation asks:** Do project lessons learned reflect:
 - a) Whether AI was used within the agreed boundaries throughout delivery?
 - b) How well humans and AI tools worked together?

The PMO should use a standard set of questions (such as the ones above), so they can be used consistently across the project and programme portfolio.

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3. **Improve maps to the AIPG-CMM:** The AI Project Governance Capability Maturity Model (AIPG-CMM) gives the PMO a way to measure and raise AI governance maturity. It has four pillars: AI Strategy and Governance, AI Tools and Infrastructure, Human Capability and Accountability, and Data Readiness and Quality. There are sixteen statements across the four pillars, measured on a five-level scale: Ad hoc, Initialised, Standardised, Enterprised and Optimised. The improvement guidance is set out level by level, so a PMO can benchmark maturity and identify priority actions across all four pillars that move the organisation towards the next level.

Note: PMOs differ in mandate. Some own the organisation's project governance framework and can change it. Others provide delivery support within a standard set elsewhere. Others operate at programme level only. The three responsibilities (embed, assure and improve) assume PMOs own the governance framework. A PMO without standard-setting authority can still exercise the Assure and Improve responsibilities through existing reporting, review and benchmarking, but the Embed responsibility requires either the authority to change the standard or a sponsor who holds that authority.

Practical First Steps for PMO Leads

The following shortlist of practical actions is drawn from the AIPGF improvement guidance and shaped for a PMO lead in an organisation that has not yet standardised AI governance in projects.

1. **Inventory current AI use.** Create a register of the AI tools and data sources already in use across projects, with their purpose and any known risks and issues. This gives the Embed responsibility a starting scope.
2. **Baseline.** Run the AIPG-CMM self-assessment to establish where the organisation sits across the four pillars. The assessment helps identify improvement priorities across the four AI governance pillars, and provides an initial baseline against which improvements can be evidenced.

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3. **Pilot lightweight AI governance.** Choose one or two short² AI-assisted projects as a pilot, each requiring:
 - A lightweight AI Assistance Plan, produced during project set-up and approved by the project sponsor.
 - AI-related risks incorporated into the project's risk assessments.
 - Project reports that include commentary on the benefits of the AI tools used and any issues experienced.
4. **Add the assurance questions to existing reviews.** Fold the Foundation, Activation and Evaluation questions into current gate reviews and reporting.
5. **Start the AI lessons repository.** Add an AI category to the lessons learned log and begin consolidating AI use lessons centrally.

It would be sensible for PMO leads, and their colleagues as applicable, to also obtain the **AIPGF Foundation and Practitioner certifications**. The certification pathway covers both elements of the Framework: mindset and method.

- The mindset elements (Principles, Core Values and Core Behaviours) provide the foundational understanding for applying the method. They give the PMO the language to explain why the governance controls exist.
- The method elements (the Aims, Activities and Deliverables for the three life cycle stages) are what a PMO tailors and embeds into their project governance framework and assures against.

A PMO lead who understands both is in a better position to self-assess maturity accurately, to tailor the Framework to their organisation's context, and to discharge their AI governance responsibilities: embed, assure and improve.

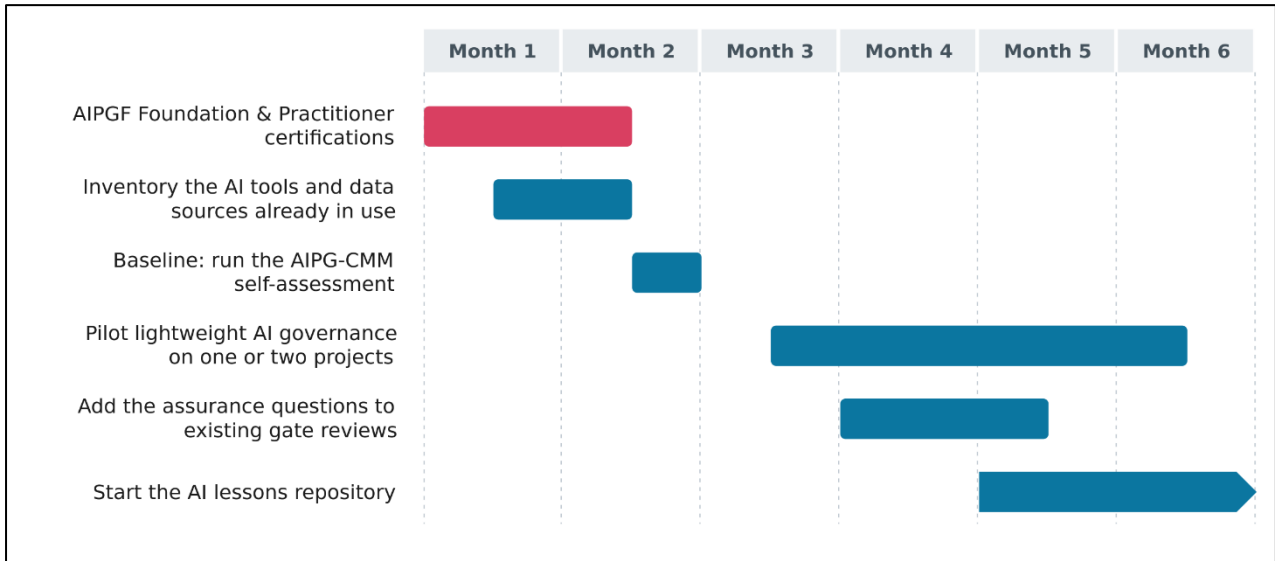
Once the pilot project concludes, facilitate discussions with the project sponsor, project manager (and team if appropriate) to obtain their feedback regarding the value of the AI governance introduced. Note the lessons learned, and use them to tailor and improve the PMO's standard AI governance approach.

² For this purpose, a short project is one of two to four months.

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The example milestone plan below shows one way to sequence the practical first steps over six months³.



These steps are a starting point. Building on them towards Standardised maturity, where AI governance controls are applied consistently across at least part of the organisation, is what puts a PMO in a position to answer the question it could not answer at the start: can you provide assurance that AI is being used ethically, efficiently and effectively in our projects?

³ The duration is an example; PMO capacity and current state of AI governance will affect the actions and how long they will take to implement.

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Conclusion

Governing AI use in projects calls for a consistent framework applied across projects, standard artefacts and the templates to build them, an assurance function that checks work against a standard, and a mechanism for continuous improvement. A PMO already provides each of those for project delivery. That is the basis of the case in this paper: the PMO extends what it already operates, rather than building a separate AI governance capability alongside it. The AI policy, the approved-tools list, the ethical position and the regulatory strategy remain organisational responsibilities. What those functions are unlikely to provide is the practical project-level application of that direction. The PMO is positioned to provide it.

The three PMO responsibilities described in this paper set out what the extension involves. Embed AI governance into the existing project governance framework so that projects inherit it. Assure AI-assisted project work using a consistent set of questions across the project life cycle. Improve AI governance maturity over time, with the PMO acting as custodian of the standard. The AIPGF supplies the life cycle stages, deliverables, assurance questions and maturity model that make each of the three responsibilities practical to discharge.

The starting point is an inventory of the AI tools already in use across projects and a baseline of where AI governance currently stands. A pilot in one or two projects then surfaces the lessons that inform how AI governance can be embedded into the standard project governance framework. With continuous improvement, the PMO reaches the position where it can evidence how AI is being used in the organisation's projects, under what controls, and with what results.

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Statement on the Use of AI

The author records the AI assistance used in preparing this paper. Claude (Anthropic) acted as developmental editor and editorial critic: drafting passages under the author's direction, testing arguments and checking consistency with sources. The paper was reviewed, revised and approved by the author, who retains sole responsibility for the argument and the final text.
