FF26
FOUNDATIONS AND FRONTIERS

AUSTRALIAN CONSTRUCTORS ASSOCIATION



FF26 POST EVENT REPORT

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OCTOBER 2026



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DRAWING TOGETHER THE LEADERS FROM INDUSTRY

The **Australian Constructors Association** (ACA) hosted Foundations and Frontiers 2026 (FF26) in Sydney on 20 August 2026, bringing together **more than 400 industry leaders** to discuss what good looks like in construction. Instead of focusing on the challenges facing construction, FF26 focused on what works and can be scaled to deliver a great impact.

One of the most critical aspects of Foundations and Frontiers is that it brings together leaders from a variety of backgrounds, including contractors, designers, advisors, investors, government and unions as equals. Through project case studies, industry discussions and government engagement, the event explored the behaviours, decisions and relationships behind some of Australia's highest-performing projects.

Projects including **Nancy Bird-Walton Western Sydney International Airport, the New Bridgewater Bridge and Atlassian Central** demonstrated that successful delivery rarely comes down to a single innovation, procurement approach or organisation. Success is created when clients, contractors, consultants and suppliers align around a shared outcome and are empowered to solve problems together.

ACA will use the insights and case studies shared through FF26 to advance our work across four pillars:

- **Commercial:** promoting better procurement, collaboration and risk allocation.
- **Productivity:** reducing waste and accelerating industrialised construction.
- **Culture:** supporting inclusive, productive workplaces and strong leadership.
- **Industry sustainability:** strengthening trust, cooperation and the industry's reputation.

ACA will continue working with government, clients, contractors, consultants, unions and industry partners to capture successful case studies, share lessons learned and accelerate the adoption of practices already delivering better outcomes.

FF26 showed that the industry knows what good looks like. The challenge now is making it standard practice.



CREATING THE MOMENTUM FOR CHANGE

The conversation started before FF26 officially began. On 19 August, approximately **100 senior representatives** gathered at Lendlease's Barangaroo offices for the Leaders' Exchange. Participants were identified as either 'problem owners' or 'solution providers' and encouraged to **share real challenges, practical solutions and lessons learned** from project delivery.

The discussions focused on trust, collaboration, productivity, workforce capacity and infrastructure delivery. Participants submitted 33 case studies ahead of the event, including 11 client challenges and 22 industry solutions.

Many of the themes explored during the Leaders' Exchange carried through into FF26, reinforcing the event's focus on scaling proven approaches rather than continuing to focus on industry challenges.

> *"We're focused on moving beyond good conversations to practical next steps."*
>
> PETER COLACINO, CEO, ACA



WE NEED LEADERS

A recurring theme throughout FF26 was the influence of leadership at all levels in driving change. Consistently, it was the behaviours of leaders, not the black and white words of a contract or charter, that created the setting for change and progress to solidify.

To deliver meaningful change, leaders must step outside the basic expectations of their roles to share knowledge and best practice. Create space for others in their teams to push what is possible and to deliver something better.

The **NextGen Exchange session** brought together emerging leaders from across the industry to discuss leadership, culture and the future of construction. The session demonstrated that the next generation is not waiting on the sidelines. Participants challenged existing assumptions about leadership and called for workplaces that are inclusive, collaborative and purpose-driven.

Audience feedback suggested the discussion struck a chord. One attendee said, ***"These young leaders are giving me hope."*** Another said, ***"Thanks to the Next Gen panel for literally bringing the colour to the conversation and showing us what the future of our industry looks like."***

The discussion reinforced a broader theme that emerged throughout FF26. Attracting and retaining talent requires more than recruitment programs. It requires workplaces where people feel valued, supported and connected to a greater purpose.



WHAT'S NEXT?

FF26 demonstrated that the industry does not suffer from a lack of ideas. Across project case studies, international examples, audience discussions and government presentations, the same lessons emerged repeatedly:

- **Build trust**
- **Strengthen the front end**
- **Consult early on design**
- **Align incentives**
- **Empower your people**
- **Focus on outcomes.**

The most encouraging takeaway was the level of alignment between industry and government. Clients, contractors, consultants and government representatives all pointed towards many of the same solutions. The challenge now is scaling these solutions.

If you have a positive story to share, send your case study to us via **ceo@constructors.com.au**



FIVE MESSAGES THAT DEFINED **FOUNDATIONS** AND **FRONTIERS 26**

1

TRUST DRIVES PERFORMANCE

2

GO SLOW TO GO FAST

3

GOOD DECISIONS DELIVER GOOD DESIGNS

4

INNOVATION REQUIRES COURAGE

5

SHARED OUTCOMES BEAT DEFENSIVE POSITIONS

TRUST DRIVES PERFORMANCE

If there was one theme that appeared in almost every session, it was trust. Speakers repeatedly challenged the idea that trust, culture and behaviours are ‘soft’ issues.Instead, they argued these are the core drivers of high performance..

The New Bridgewater Bridge team highlighted how trust, respect and leadership behaviours underpinned every delivery decision. Speakers from Western Sydney International Airport described an environment where project partners actively helped one another succeed because everyone understood that if one party failed, the project failed.

Across multiple sessions, speakers argued that trust:

- Improves decision-making
- Reduces duplication
- Creates accountability
- Increases productivity
- Allows teams to focus on solving problems rather than protecting positions.

The importance of culture was reinforced by NSW Minister for Roads and Regional Transport Jenny Aitchison, who spoke about the importance of creating safe, respectful and sustainable workplaces and expressed strong support for industry efforts to improve workplace culture, including implementation of the Culture Standard across projects in NSW.

> ***“Trust unlocks productivity across every level.”***
>
> ED MCPHILLIPS, COO
> HAZELL BROTHERS

WHAT THE AUDIENCE SAID

Creating a culture defined by trust and good behaviours was the most frequently referenced topic across the 268 comments, questions and observations submitted throughout the day.

Audience insights were captured on the day by Insights Partner Contented, which acted as a conversation partner throughout FF26, gathering comments and questions from every session and turning them into the themes reflected in this report.

Attendees agreed with the importance of trust and collaboration but wanted guidance on how those behaviours can be embedded within organisations and projects.



ED MCPHILLIPS

2 GO SLOW TO GO FAST

One of the clearest lessons from FF26 was the value of investing more effort at the beginning of projects. Successful projects all spent significant time on early planning, design development and relationship building before construction commenced.

Speakers challenged the industry's tendency to seek early certainty at the expense of better outcomes. It was evident that time spent upfront on the right issues is not delay. It is risk management.

Examples included:

- Two years of early contractor involvement before construction began on Atlassian Central
- Extensive pre-contract alignment workshops on Western Sydney International Airport
- Early collaboration to resolve design and delivery challenges on the New Bridgewater Bridge.

NSW Treasurer Daniel Mookhey reinforced this theme, outlining the NSW Government's commitment to better project development, earlier industry engagement and more deliberate risk allocation. He argued that government must become a more mature client and invest more effort before projects reach the market.

> ***"We must develop projects properly before taking them to market."***
>
> THE HON. DANIEL MOOKHEY, TREASURER OF NSW

WHAT THE AUDIENCE SAID

Attendees strongly supported greater investment in planning and early engagement. Many questioned whether current procurement models encourage the industry to spend enough time resolving issues before construction starts.

A recurring observation was that many project problems can be traced back to decisions made too late or with insufficient collaboration.



TREASURER MOOKHEY

3 GOOD DECISIONS DELIVER GOOD DESIGNS

A major focus of FF26 was improving productivity through clearer accountabilities and better decision making.

The Redesigning Design session highlighted the value of clear decision making, early collaboration and greater certainty during design, demonstrating how these factors shape project outcomes well before construction begins.

Speakers highlighted that:

- Early engagement improves design quality and reduces unnecessary work
- Well-defined governance and review processes support faster decision-making
- Operators, maintainers and end users bring valuable insights when involved early
- Greater design certainty improves productivity outcomes.

Government speakers reinforced this message, highlighting reforms aimed at involving industry earlier, reducing unnecessary requirements and creating greater space for innovation and improved project outcomes.

> ***"50% of design time is taken up in the review cycle."***
>
> CATHY HAYES,
> HEAD OF CLIENT STRATEGY
> NSW & ACT, CPB CONTRACTORS

WHAT THE AUDIENCE SAID

The Redesigning Design session generated some of the highest engagement levels of the day. Audience comments consistently focused on:

- Design ownership
- Design assurance
- Review cycles
- Front-end planning
- Avoiding rework.



REDESIGNING DESIGN PANEL (L-R) CATHY HAYES, HEAD OF CLIENT STRATEGY NSW & ACT, CPB CONTRACTORS; COLIN CRANEY, GENERAL MANAGER, DESIGN AND ENGINEERING MANAGEMENT, JOHN HOLLAND; ANTHONY HART, DIRECTOR, ENGINEERING, DESIGN & ASSURANCE, SUBURBAN RAIL LOOP AUTHORITY

4 INNOVATION REQUIRES COURAGE

Leaders challenged both industry and government to be more ambitious.

The opportunity to accelerate the adoption of new approaches, including digital, advanced manufacturing and greater standardisation stood out as opportunities for government and industry to partner. While the great debate was on a knife's edge on whether these reforms deserve a label, leaders identified the need to be deliberate about embracing change.

International examples demonstrated a more mature approach than Australia and pointed to what is possible when organisations embrace manufacturing-led construction, prefabrication and modern methods of construction.

The UK stands out as an example of how long-term investment and procurement reform have enabled major productivity gains through offsite manufacturing and standardisation.

The data centre sector, particularly in the United States, provided another example of how new delivery models, modularisation and speed of execution can redefine project performance. The challenge put to industry was not whether innovation works. The challenge is whether organisations are prepared to create environments that support experimentation and change.

> ***"We've got to be bold, we've got to be braver than what we are today."***
>
> MIKE LEWIS,
> OPERATIONS DIRECTOR,
> OFFICE OF THE MANAGING
> DIRECTOR, LAING O'ROURKE

WHAT THE AUDIENCE SAID

Interest in innovation, data centres, digital delivery and modern methods of construction was evident throughout the day. Many attendees wanted to know how to overcome the barriers that continue to prevent broader adoption of the approaches that have already been proven successful internationally.

Questions focused on:

- How to scale MMC in Australia
- Digital delivery opportunities
- Sustainability outcomes
- Future infrastructure requirements.

The level of interest demonstrated a clear appetite for proven productivity solutions.



MIKE LEWIS

5 SHARED OUTCOMES BEAT DEFENSIVE POSITIONS

The importance of aligning incentives around shared outcomes was a consistent message through the day. Leaders highlighted examples where projects performed better when participants focused on project success and the long-term sustainability of the industry rather than organisational interests.

Examples included:

- Government agencies creating space for industry-led solutions
- Clients supporting innovation rather than avoiding it
- Contractors helping competitors solve project challenges
- Supply chain partners participating earlier in project development.

Speakers consistently described collaboration not as an aspiration but as a practical delivery tool.

NSW Treasurer Daniel Mookhey echoed this message, arguing that government and industry both have responsibilities in building more productive and sustainable project environments. He highlighted the importance of realistic pricing, honest risk allocation and stronger client-contractor relationships.

> ***"Outcome drives process, not process driving outcomes."***
>
> EMMA PETERS, PROJECT DIRECTOR, ACCIONA

WHAT THE AUDIENCE SAID

Audience comments suggested strong support for greater collaboration but also frustration at how difficult it remains within some project environments. Many participants questioned how collaborative behaviours can be sustained within traditional contracting models and organisational structures.

The discussion reinforced that collaboration remains one of the industry's greatest opportunities and one of its biggest challenges.



FIRESIDE CHAT (L-R) ANNABEL CROOKES, PRESIDENT, ACA; THE HON. DANIEL MOOKHEY, TREASURER OF NSW

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FOUNDATIONS AND FRONTIERS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL CONSTRUCTION FORUM

AUSTRALIAN CONSTRUCTORS ASSOCIATION

