Key Challenges in Social Value 2025: responsible stakeholder engagement, robust data management and reliable digitalisation

Identifying nine key challenges from research, theory and practice

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Executive summary

Trying to operate and function within the messy web of social value of the UK's built environment in the last few years has proven a hard task. Between incomplete metrics, competing measurement frameworks, emerging digital approaches, calls for more stakeholder inclusion….it is a tough time to feel like positive social impact is truly being created.

This white paper is a round-up of the most significant challenges we have seen in social value in recent years, collated and presented in a way that we hope is helpful to those in social value practice today.

Our aim is not to provide rigid solutions but instead provide some clarity on the challenges faced for 2025. We champion the authentic, effective and inclusive growth of social value practices that we have seen from others across the field.

This white paper presents the current challenges and opportunities facing practitioners of social value in the built environment in the UK, with a growing focus on digital transformation. We seek to investigate the current challenges and opportunities surrounding social value, digital innovation, equality and diversity within the UK's bult environment through the promise of effective stakeholder engagement.

The authors continue to question how well the built environment is equipped for dealing with authentic, effective and inclusive community engagement and the methods available for integrating public perceptions - particularly minority and vulnerable group participants – in the design and delivery of net zero and climate resilient projects in the UK. Between the dual grand challenges of digital transformation and sustainability transformations, we continue to champion social value practices as a positive driving force to centre communities in technical projects.

Purpose

This white paper has been produced to help provide clarity for those in the growing profession and maturing field of social value practice. Some of the points we make may not be original, unique or new, but what we have done is bring together the messy web of social value to provide clarity for others in the professional community.

Who is this for?

This white paper has been created with practitioners, policy makers, and academic researchers in mind. Social value as a field has always worked across the boundaries of practice, policy and research to create innovative new ways of doing things. This in turn has allowed people to work across boundaries and influence projects and thinking in a holistic way. This white paper continues with this tradition.

What we have done

Drawing on extensive experience of the authors in both research and practice, we have presented the key challenges we see as salient to social value in 2025.

Key findings

We have grouped our findings across the people, skills and systems change needed in three primary themes: responsible stakeholder engagement, robust data management, and reliable digitalisation.

So what?

By contributing to the growing social value knowledge base, this white paper adds to the growing archive that social value practitioners can access to learn and use as an evidence base to push for change.
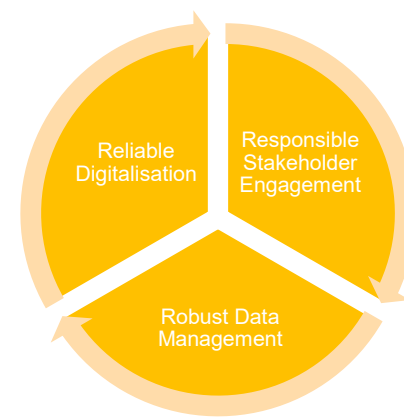
Setting out the problem

Social value practitioners are responding to a complex environment. They need to show mastery in creating sustainable outcomes through drawing on social value, engagement and digital tools and skills.

The demand for collaboration, sustainability, and societal impact is increasing across the built environment. This requires a shift towards effective stakeholder engagement, emphasising social value creation and leveraging digital innovation (Loosemore et al., 2016). By actively involving communities and end-users, project teams foster an inclusive environment and can deliver projects that meet local needs and aspirations.

The long lifecycle and purpose of built environment projects are aiming to address complex societal challenges, such as climate change, urbanisation, biodiversity loss, inequalities and social mobility (Cidik et al., 2024). To account for this, new legislation and conceptual frameworks on social value are developed to reconcile social sustainability in the context of net zero and climate resilient project delivery (Behar & Sykes 2022, Chan et al. 2022, Çıdık 2023). However, there are criticisms highlighting the gap in interdisciplinary collaboration and leadership to develop inclusive frameworks that deal with community perspective and uneven distribution of power in stakeholder engagement, thus failing to enable 'true' social value. This is coupled with the lack of theoretical grounding in social value academic research, given its relatively new nature as an academic field, meaning a strong foundation for practice is still developing.

Social value requirements are becoming more prevalent in the built environment industry and practice in the UK. The humanistic, qualitative nature of stakeholder engagement and social value is at odds with the quantitative, performance, metrics-based practices and processes across the built environment. The contribution of this white paper is firstly, by outlining three areas to support an evidence base of effective community engagement and social value.

There are many truisms in building a sustainable built environment. Effective stakeholder engagement is essential for social value creation, and more social value creates better engagement. Digital tools and complex data will be used to measure social value and also create social value. Digitisation will shape community engagement, and community engagement should shape digitisation.

In trying to navigate this complex, messy and constantly changing field of competing, complementing and interdependent challenges, this white paper intends to contribute by adding some clarity and simplification.

A quick note on methods

The data drawn from in this white paper is a culmination of the knowledge and experience of the authors, drawing on dozens of social value projects in both research and practice.

More specifically, this report draws on research projects of the three researchers which have been funded by EPSRC, Innovate UK and Research England.

We are grateful to the experts we have engaged with through these research projects, drawing on expertise across design, development and construction; asset management; audit, assurance and tax service; social value; net zero and climate resilience; and environmental economics.

We have used quotes gathered in workshops which formed parts of our research projects, to illustratee the thinking of those working in the field. The workshops engaged with industry and academic UK-based professionals to examine their perspectives of inclusive stakeholder engagement and the creation of social value in current built environment practices. The discussion topics included, current experiences working in the built environment, the challenges of inclusive stakeholder engagement and social value, the tools and methods used in the project process and the opportunities and new directions for these fields in the future.

When collaborating on other research outputs, it became clear to the authors that the end of 2024 demonstrated a moment in time where the need to share this learning for other social value practitioners was pertinent.

Dr Sarah Fitton explains: "there is a need to get the fundamental basics right in terms of inclusive stakeholder engagement. There is no point trying to innovate through digital platforms if these basics are not common practice."

Key Challenges for Social Value in 2025

Responsible Stakeholder Engagement

Doing stakeholder engagement in a way that empowers communities without putting the workload on to them is a hard balance. It's even more important in an age of increasing digitalisation which assumes more input from communities.

People: the promise of digital tools to empower more individuals and communities.

Skills: it is widely acknowledged that there is a skills gap on how to do engagement well to truly centre people.

Systems: there aren't easy ways to share learning or best practice, even within organisations.

Robust Data Management

Without robust data management social value practices struggle to gain the consistency that is needed for longer term impact. We need to apply the fundamentals of good quality data and information management to social value.

People: knowing who needs the data and why, drives better structures and processes.

Skills: Selecting which definitions and frameworks to use determines the relevance of social value data.

Systems: for sustainable impact we need to create data management processes for a purpose.

Reliable Digitalisation

Understanding the inter-relationship between digital transitions and social value. Social value helps create better digital products: digital products help create better social value.

People: leaders need to advocate for uncertainty and embrace ambiguity to keep the digital tools humanistic.

Skills: there is a need to separate work across disciplines and recognise areas of expertise to then collaborate.

Systems: we need to explicitly acknowledge the feedback loops of social value and digital.

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Responsible Stakeholder Engagement

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People

The promise of digital tools to empower more individuals and communities.

Like social value, there is a huge conversation around digital data in stakeholder engagement, what that actually means and how is it used. Digital innovation is often seen as the way forward to enhance and progress projects. There are many stakeholder engagement digital platforms that aid engagement either through the publishing of information or through the two-way flow of information. However, these tools rely on a person's ability or privilege to have a device which allows them to access the platforms, the infrastructure to use the internet, the skills to know how to access the platforms, the understanding of the project to obtain or give the required data. For certain demographic and socio-economic groups this is not accessible.

There was an overwhelming consensus amongst the workshop participants that a digital platform is not the single answer to creating inclusive stakeholder engagement and the subsequent social value that can be identified from this.

Skills

It is widely acknowledged that there is a skills gap on how to do engagement well to truly centre people.

Stakeholder engagement and social value are often seen as specialist fields and consequently specialists are brought on board to aid a project. However, a common occurrence is that engagement specialists are engaging with communities that they are not local too and do not have existing relationships with. This can greatly reduce the effectiveness of the engagement process. A solution is to use third sector organisations (charities, NGOs) who are already in the community and have existing relationships to carry out the communication and engagement, particularly on large infrastructure and built environment projects.

There is also an overarching need to enhance and develop the skills required to gather, analyse and apply data gained from stakeholder engagement, such as the qualitative data required for social value identification and creation.

Systems

There aren't easy ways to share learning or best practice, even within organisations.

The subjective nature of stakeholder engagement and social value means that it is difficult to report on what has been done or create examples of best practice. A clear research finding was that there is a lack of published case studies, and a subsequent missing evidence base of good practice stakeholder engagement examples. The lack of an evidence base means it is difficult to provide the justification as to why stakeholder engagement is important in the project process and the identification of social value.

Case studies are needed to act as pilot/evidence-based studies to share lessons learned on early stakeholder engagement's economic impact (budget) on projects. There is no clear decision matrix or tool to help the industry with intentional engagement levels during the planning phase.

The creation of an evidence base that holds pilot case studies which demonstrate the positive impacts (cost, programme) of inclusive stakeholder engagement and the negative impacts of not delivering inclusive stakeholder engagement negative (stakeholder reaction, cost, delays) would be a useful resource for the industry to have.

"Power imbalances can be reduced if local groups and local people are used as engagement facilitators".

"We need to enhance the qualitative robustness of social value evaluations and understand how to assess the intangible to communities"

"Very difficult to get case studies of stakeholder engagement"

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Robust Data Management

Without effective data management, social value practices struggle to gain the consistency that is needed for longer term impact. How do we apply the fundamentals of good quality data and information management to social value?

People

Knowing who needs the data and why drives better structures and processes.

A prominent area of data was that surrounding the skills required for those in the role of facilitators and enhancing community engagement and collaboration.

Professionals do not often value the intangible nature of community ('lay') knowledge and do not prioritise resources for inclusive, participatory stakeholder engagement at an early design stage.

Taking a step back on projects or in organisations to understand the intention of data collection, interpretation and reporting will help create better structured data. The quality of the outputs depends on the quality of the inputs.

Industry professionals need to find innovative methods to engage with groups who traditionally 'won't engage' and to build a record of good practice place-based case studies of a wide range of community groups with specific social value requirements and perceptions.

Skills

Selecting which definitions and frameworks to use determines the relevance of social value data.

Understanding the art behind data management is a complex skill that takes significant training. Having social value practitioners who are data literate, or mediators who can communicate the social value data needs, means technical people such as data scientists can be drawn on.

It is widely acknowledged that definitions and assessment methods for social value remain vague and inconsistent as there is 'no size fits all'. And that this is a positive thing to not make social value too simplistic. In order to embrace this complexity and represent social value data in the most robust way, there needs to be wider acceptance of data management and analytics skills.

Systems

For sustainable impact we need to create data management processes for a purpose.

Qualitative data is often an afterthought as it does not fit in with reporting tools and mechanisms as easily as quantitative data. Consequently, this means qualitative data pertaining to stakeholder engagement and social value is often overlooked or not considered, particularly those around experiences, opinions and motivations. The research also shows that there is a gap in engagement tools for examining interdependencies between qualitative and quantitative social value data. Both types of data are as equally important as each other, but it is about ensuring that the quantitative data doesn't dominate the qualitative data. It is about using the qualitative and quantitative data to enhance the overall outputs together.

"We need to enhance the qualitative robustness of social value evaluations and understand how to assess the intangible to communities"

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Reliable Digitalisation

Understanding the inter-relationship between digital transitions and social value to support inclusive digital transformation. Social value helps create better digital products: digital products help create better social value.

People

Leaders need to advocate for uncertainty and embrace ambiguity to keep the digital tools humanistic.

The humanistic nature of stakeholder engagement and the importance of listening and hearing stakeholders is difficult to replicate using a digital platform. However, the fundamental principles of stakeholder engagement such as early engagement, collaboration and co-production are not necessarily common practice on all built environment projects. Until this is realised, the development of an online digital tool won't have the desired impact.

Skills

There is a need to separate work across disciplines and recognise areas of expertise to then collaborate.

There is a frantic pace to both social value work and digital transformation work in the built environment: but both in a paradoxical way that progress remains relatively slow compared to expectations. This is in part due to a misunderstanding of where the industry currently stands in terms of skills, and that a lot more investment of resources is needed to move the dial. However, it is also because both social value and digital work responsibility often gets put on to people within organisations who have to self-teach through trial and error, as there are no guidebooks available ~~set out~~.

This frantic energy but slow pace often doesn't leave much room to learn from where things don't go as planned. From our research, we can see there is a need to work with interdisciplinarity but also have clear boundaries of expertise. Try to work with less assumptions on where the other experts are at with their work, and be open to finding a meeting point. Data management, digital innovation, social value and engagement work are all in their infancy within built environment practices. The only way we can learn is through trial and error and by sharing experiences.

Systems

We need to explicitly acknowledge the feedback loops of social value and digital.

One of the hardest things to grapple with in a tangible and usable way, is the close relationship between social value creation and digital tool development. There is hope for digital tools to help us create more social value, but we have to also help social value be built into more of our digital tools. This chicken-egg scenario is why larger more complex digitalisation such as smart cities or digital twins are so difficult to get right.
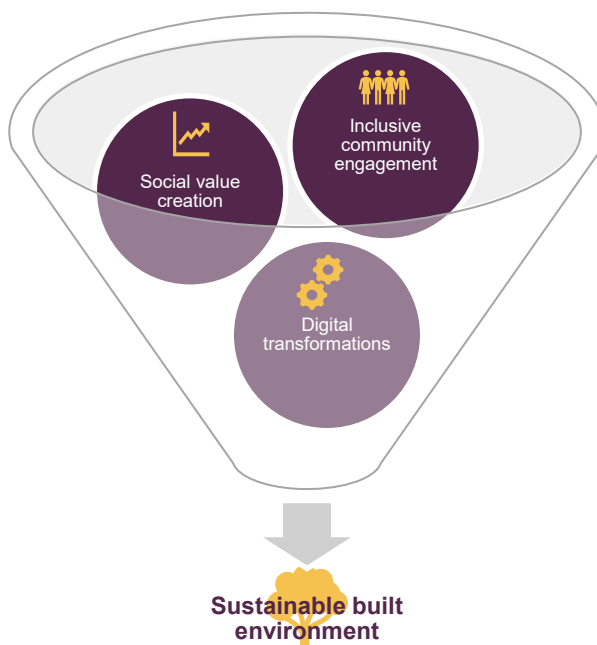
Instead of trying to reach for the end goal first, we propose an acceptance of incremental change that build on feedback loops, learning and knowledge exchange that allow the final goal to be reached. This is widely accepted in certain sub-fields already, but a great understanding of these needs is crucial. Along with the time and resources required to get there.

"it is predominantly based on participants with no social anxiety who are willing to speak up. Some people would not accept the meetings being put into a digital environment. The lack of trust in an organisation (industry) could increase using digital tools. Trust is in perception and reputation, so to build trust we must have personal contact and we need to be careful with the level of digitisation".

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What next?

This white paper has highlighted the interdependence of the stakeholder engagement process, social value creation, and digital innovation in the built environment. Effective stakeholder engagement, enabled by inclusive practices, fosters collaboration and informed decision-making. Digital technologies and digital platforms facilitate stakeholder engagement, enhance transparency, and support the delivery of social value, but they do not and should not replace the fundamental principles of stakeholder engagement – listening to communities and understanding their needs.

Social value is not confined to one stage of the project. These key challenges are not the full picture of what is happening in social value work across the UK and within the built environment. We would call on others to continue building on the conversation to further explore how these challenges might differ across different parts of an organisation, across the project lifecycle, or across a supply chain. ~~Social value is not confined to one stage of a project.~~

Social value creation

Inclusive community engagement

Digital transformations

Sustainable built environment

Policy

The authors' motivation for wok in this area is a drive for equality, diversity and inclusion within the built environment. We examine the extent to which these aspects are integrated into design decision-making and project delivery, and ways in which we can push for more. On one hand social value, sustainability, quality of life, and on the other digitisation and data are two grand challenges the UK government is responding to through updated policy. This is alongside the place based and planning policy developments.

In this white paper we present how this has translated into current challenges, and what this might mean for organisational policy considerations.

Practice

The development of an evidence base to justify early and inclusive stakeholder engagement is key in demonstrating the validity of the processes. We need to gain a real picture of what is happening in stakeholder engagement and the different scenarios faced. We call on those in industry to also share their learning when possible, so investment in trialled methods can have a greater impact.

This can contribute to one end of closing the theory-practice gap.

Research

There is limited academic research on social value theoretical frameworks on which to develop social value practices in the built environment; hence the other end of the theory-practice gap.

This white paper is building on the academic research done by the authors, acknowledging that what we present here is the practical insights not the theoretical findings. But we hope to use this as a means to communicate with other academic researchers carrying out ~~doing~~ similar work.

Further reading

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Organisations we would like to highlight in addressing these challenges in 2025:

CHY Consultancy

Thrive

Institute of Social Value

Young Professionals in Social Value

What Impact

Impact Reporting

Simetrica-Jacobs

There is a growing network of social value practitioners and researchers who are sharing their learning online. Join the conversation on LinkedIn.

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I am Passionate about embedding social value thinking into our cities, infrastructure and built environment developments. I am an interdisciplinary, placemaking professional who works on projects combining the technical and the social. I champion new, sustainable approaches to projects in academic, industrial and policy-based settings. I do this through promotion of learning, knowledge sharing and innovation when facilitating working relationships across various disciplines. I believe in a collaborative, process-led approach to achieving the best overall value from complex projects. I have a track record of working on innovation projects developing socio-technical solutions including on megaprojects, nationally significant infrastructure, digitalisation of place based outcomes, and trialling approaches to strategic change management in multinational organisations.

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I have over 15 years of professional experience in sustainability in the built environment. My research focuses on building and infrastructure design and delivery as a socio-technical process towards achieving net zero, climate resilience, social value, and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in construction projects.
I am passionate about social dialogue, translating academic output into practical tools and recommendations for practitioners and policymakers, including international organisations, community-support organisations, local governments, and the private sector. I have a PhD in Engineering for Sustainable Development from the University of Cambridge (2013), which focused on developing a novel conceptual framework for future-proofing the energy design of housing developments.
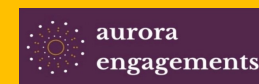
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I am is a chartered town planner with over 15 years' experience in the fields of stakeholder engagement and social value. I previously worked for a multidisciplinary consultancy working in a number of areas including town planning, transport planning, stakeholder engagement and social value. I also achieved a PhD from Cambridge University in 2015. My research focused on understanding how the social value of infrastructure projects is identified and articulated, using flood alleviation schemes as case studies. An integral part of the research examined how the stakeholder engagement process can either negatively or positively influence the identification and creation of social value. Following my PhD, I have published a number of peer reviewed journal articles on the subject of infrastructure, stakeholder engagement and social value. I use my experience and skills of working in both industry and academia to bridge the gap between theory and practice in these fields.