

## More than a building

A cross-industry roundtable exploring the role of UK property development in creating social value

**BURO  
FOUR**



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**A cross-industry roundtable exploring the role of UK property development in creating social value – the lessons, challenges and actions needed to translate policy expectations and market momentum into long-term community and commercial benefits.**

For the UK development sector, social value is moving from a policy requirement to a strategic consideration.

Research by Buro Four's Max McLean shows developers are recognising that social value delivers tangible commercial benefits, from reduced risk and improved viability to stronger long-term reputation.

High-profile regeneration schemes which prioritise community, culture, heritage and wellbeing are proving that social value-led approaches can deliver both profit and meaningful societal impact.

But there are still large gaps between social value ambition and practical delivery on the ground. Recognising that buildings are part of wider communities, and just not standalone assets, remains a complex task.

To build on this research, we recently invited a group of partners and voices from across the industry to talk about common barriers, share best practice and explore realistic next steps to progress.

## Introducing our experts

Max McLean – Buro Four

Ruth Oates – Buro Four

Nick Tibbitts – Buro Four

Lucy Pallett – Buro Four

Kwok Ng – The Crown Estate

Mena Ali – Social Life

Claire Dale-Lace – Stanton Williams

Mark Hoskins – NTR Planning

Stephen Pey – EPR Architects

Abbie Sobik – EPR Architects

## “What does ‘social value’ mean to you in the context of development?”

Ruth Oates, Buro Four, kicked off the discussion by reflecting on the overarching question: “What does ‘social value’ mean to you in the context of development?”

She defined social value as thinking of a building not as island, but part of a larger ecosystem. “Social value isn’t about what money can buy,” she added. “It’s about doing things with the means you have and making better choices for society as you’re doing it.”

### The community informs the design

Mena Ali, Social Life, explained that as a research consultancy entrusted to consider how changes in the built environment impact people’s livelihood and wellbeing, design must be ‘place-based’ and ‘socially sustainable’. This must be led by the needs and wants of the surrounding community.

“Social value is about holding a mirror back to the local environment and wider community” agreed Nick Tibbitts, Buro Four. “We have to consider it on three levels: environmental, social, economic. And by being responsive from the outset, it becomes more than just a tick-box exercise.”

Backing this, Abbie Sobik, EPR Architects, said she sees social value as how the community informs the project design “to create a space that they actually want to work, live and play in.”

Kwok Ng, The Crown Estate, reflected on how his organisation must consider social value on two tiers: the systemic issues affecting the whole of the UK, and the local-based needs of councils and boroughs. He encouraged all developers and landlords level to consider and support both.



Urban Village Fete 2025 - Greenwich Peninsula

### Engagement must be baked in from the beginning

One thing that all participants agreed on was the need to ‘bake in’ social value considerations as early as possible in the design and development process.

Stephen Pey, EPR Architects, said: “From an architectural point of view, we need to make sure that community engagement happens right at the early stage, because the later these things get ‘tacked on’, the less impact they have. It needs to happen right from the beginning and top down from the team.”

This was underscored by Mark Hoskins, NTR Planning, who reflected on his experience as a planning consultant on schemes across a broad breadth of use classes. He said that whilst projects such as hospitals and schools are “steeped in social value”, some of the biggest opportunities can come from large-scale, mixed-use development.

Projects like these can draw on the creativity of architects and the wider development team to deliver meaningful uses that are genuinely embedded within the urban grain. By prioritising early engagement during the consultation stage, they can better serve and benefit the wider community.

Max McLean, Buro Four added that this early involvement delivers downstream benefits: “Early engagement gives you the chance to build genuine relationships with the local community. That insight not only supports the planning application and reduces related programme risks, but also helps the scheme progress more smoothly throughout its lifecycle as a whole.”

He referenced the example of a major urban regeneration scheme that he is currently working on. Early on and throughout the masterplan, the team placed community engagement at the forefront – from large-scale community weekends to more localised “meet the builders” days. He said: “This was never an explicit requirement, but it’s about building and maintaining those relationships. It has been great to see and learn from, and it helps to de-risk the programme because you’ve helped mitigate potential issues at a people level early on.”

### Social value should be embedded into recruitment

Claire Dale-Lace, from architect practice Stanton Williams, reflected that “Architects have always understood social value as an integral part of designing a successful project - one that genuinely serves the communities who use it. One important way to deepen that understanding is by ensuring that the teams shaping our built environment are as diverse as possible. Opening pathways into the profession and the wider construction industry is vital to achieving this. However, the sector has historically struggled to make access broad and inclusive enough for this to happen at scale.”

“Social value is about holding a mirror back to the local environment and wider community.”

This was echoed by Kwok Ng, The Crown Estate, who reflected on a recent report by the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) suggesting that the UK requires roughly 47,860 extra construction workers per year to meet demand. He said: “This is a big, big gap in the market. It has become increasingly difficult to understand what training pathways are available to get people into these skilled roles. So we need to step in and create these pathways to ensure resilience for people working in this industry.”

### Regulation is influencing decision making

When asked about the policy and market drivers behind social value in construction, Kwok Ng highlighted the impact of the Procurement Act 2023, requiring contracting authorities to assign at least 10% of the total score weighting to social value. He said that the policy has driven cultural change within The Crown Estate, ingraining discussions about sustainable social outcomes into everything they do: “It’s even more embedded into the core of our decision making and delivery.”

Ruth Oates and Stephen Pey agreed that they have seen this positive pattern emerging with clients in the public sector. And while there is a less direct incentive for private developers to prioritise social value, the regulatory environment is having a knock-on effect.

Increasingly, developers are seeking to understand how humans interact with the space around buildings,

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just as much as the buildings themselves. Stephen Pey noted: “It used to be that the green space or community benefit around a site was an add-on. We’re seeing that being inverted now. We still have a long way to go. But clients are starting to recognise that it brings additional value in terms of the longevity of a space. And it’s being led by public sector, instead of the other way around.”

### The planning system can be a barrier or enabler

“In terms of social value as a concept, planners have been slow to come onboard in express terms through dedicated planning policy,” Mark Hoskins commented. “But social and societal benefit is nonetheless ingrained in much of what the planning system seeks to deliver.”

“The Government seem to be beating their stick very hard on the planning system right now, as a layer of over-regulation which is putting the brakes on economic and construction growth. There is some justification for this – the Government is seeking to remove some of the financial burdens placed on developers through the regulatory planning system.”

Mark Hoskins highlighted the example of affordable housing in London, where the Government is considering lowering the threshold for ‘fast tracking’ and viability assessments, by reducing affordable housing quotas from 35% to 20% provision of affordable housing units.

“While this would result in less affordable housing as a percentage of total residential units, the Government’s thinking is that it could make the difference, in viability terms, between a project commencing or not. Whilst social value considerations should be evident in every scheme that comes forward, where they carry a cost burden, similar tensions may arise.”

### Developers need to consciously think about the long-term view

As Mark Hoskins explained, there is still a tendency to see social value in terms of its immediate burden on cost. He said: “The one thing I’ve always sought to

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understand, because, as a planner, I’ve often felt like a guinea pig throughout the process, is: if you do it right, is there an enhancement in GDV (Gross Development Value)?” Sometimes this value might be less easy to quantify in the short-term but must be looked at in terms of the growth it will bring over time. He referred to the example of a mixed-used development project which prioritised smaller independent shops over more profitable high street retailers: “The benefit of a broader mix of uses was the creation of a really strong local identity, with a sense of individual pride and ownership by the residents and users, which was seen as something that could actually enhance GDV.”

Kwok Ng reflected on how a number of recent schemes, such as Regent Street, St James, Olympia and Canary Wharf in London have taken into consideration not just their primary office use, but amenities for people outside of working hours, resulting in a much more vibrant community. He said: “The difference is, people want to be there. It’s more than just transitory. Think about what you can do to improve resilience so that people will actually want to be there and the space will survive long-term.”

### Measurement is a gap between policy and practical delivery

When the group was asked “what are some of the gaps between policy and practical delivery?” a recurring theme was the ability to quantify and measure the social value their projects were achieving.

Lucy Pallett talked about some of the metrics used to effectively communicate with project stakeholders,

including the Social Value TOM (Themes Outcomes, Measures) System. While this is the most widely recognised and adopted framework for reporting social value, it can be a challenge to keep pace with guidance as it changes and evolves. Such a rapidly evolving system can impact accuracy, and relies on capturing the right data.

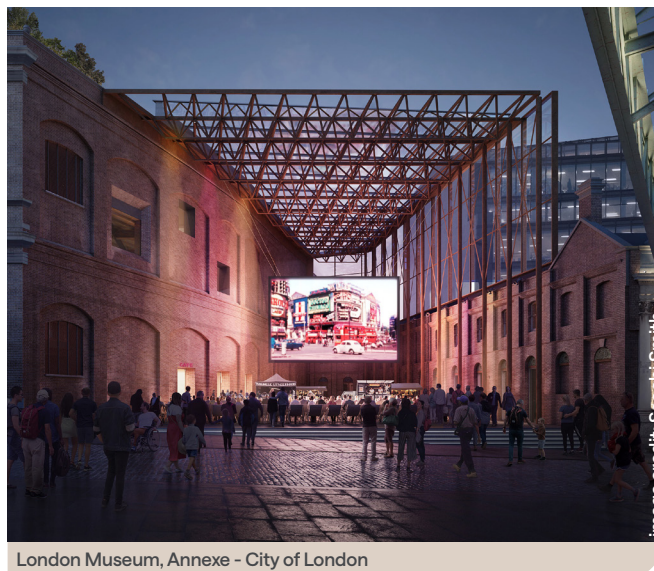
Kwok Ng commented: “Something like TOMs is fantastic to give you breadth, but it’s harder to make it apply to each area that we look at and their granular challenges.”

Mena Ali explained how Social Life has created its own bespoke framework, with a range of indicators to understand what makes communities thrive. She said: “We pull data from national datasets to understand hyper-local senses of belonging, wellbeing, loneliness and safety, then benchmark our survey data from our framework.”

Using this benchmarking framework, the company undertook a longitudinal study over four decades to discover how best to embed the most social value into an estate regeneration project in South Acton, London. They looked closely at how local people felt about the area over time and the facilities they wanted: “intangibles that might not neatly fit into social development metrics, and which social ROI might not capture.”

Nick Tibbitts said of benchmarks and KPIs that they often miss the point of social engagement, and that doing it “just because it’s the right thing to do” is not enough. While everyone on a project needs a common basis for understanding, it should start with the “why” and then creating the measurements to lead that “why”.

The issue is, said Mena Ali: “How do you take this grassroots, localised, bespoke approach and apply it to an overarching scheme that is somehow universal? That is the challenge we have to unlock.”



London Museum, Annexe - City of London

### Case studies are vital to helping derisk social value

When asked “does integrating social value add cost and risk?” Stephen Pey answered yes.

“It does take time, research and monitoring,” he said. “Somebody has to pay for that. The answer is case studies to show what did and didn’t work, and positive examples of the surrounding area. Sometimes you only find that out 5, 10, or 15 years after it’s finished.”

Claire Dale-Lace noted: “We want to make sure projects leave a legacy and that they continue to deliver value in every sense of the word. And beyond individual projects, one of the most effective ways we have seen to broaden the impact we can make is through sharing case studies.

“Case studies are a catalyst to break people’s perceived barriers,” said Claire Dale-Lace. “Having those case studies helps to show what is being delivered, how it can be done, what the solutions are and give people confidence. Openly sharing lessons learnt is very

important, while people are still finding their feet - it’s imperative that we learn from each other. And we can see there is not necessary a correlation between the size of a project and the impact it has - smaller projects can be just as impactful!”

One example of this is a project that Stanton Williams has worked on with Buro Four, the new London Museum. The project looks to redefine how museums engage with the public, ensuring that the buildings are porous, inviting the public to interact with the museum in numerous ways. This will not stay static, but will evolve over time, to be a place for every Londoner.

“We get to the point where we solve one social value issue, and another one crops up,” said Kwok Ng. “This is inevitable as time goes on. Tackling that is our mission. Things do change and we need to adapt.”

### Join the conversation

What do you think? Is there a specific point we raised you want to talk more about? Get involved and chat to us on LinkedIn or contact our team. We’d love to hear from you.



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