

CTBUH UK Chapter Panel Discussion

Social Value in Tall Buildings



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Shackleton House

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Social value refers to the wider benefits a construction project can have on society. Put simply, it encompasses the well-being of individuals, communities, and the environment. Generating social value is a fundamental priority on every construction project, and this is especially true for tall buildings. As major developments, they offer unique opportunities to deliver lasting benefits to the communities they serve.

On the 13th of May, the CTBUH UK Chapter brought leading industry experts together to discuss approaches to social value in large-scale urban developments. Hosted by leading environmental design consultant Hilson Moran at Shackleton House, the event brought sustainability specialists, developers, urban planners, and social value strategists together to explore the potential for holistic, human-centred outreach that looks beyond financial metrics to create meaningful community impact.

Chaired by **Vince Ugarow**, Design Director at Hilson Moran, panellists included **Chris Murphy**, Senior Associate at Things Made Public, **Tiffany Hepher**, Head of Social Value at DP9, **Marie-Louise Schembri**, Sustainability Director at Hilson Moran, **Tom Cazalet**, Development Director at Hines, and **Paul Hargreaves**, Construction Director at Lipton Rogers. Each panellist delivered a presentation on their understanding of social value, summaries of which can be found opposite.

Chris Murphy, Senior Associate at Things Made Public, on: The ‘Social’ in Social Value

“Quantifying social value can be confusing – as an industry, we should focus on the social element first – it’s about considering human needs.”

Chris zeroed in on the ‘social’ aspect of social value, considering what that might look like through a built environment lens. Emphasising that value begins with human relationships; Chris reasoned that creating a lasting positive impact can only be achieved if genuine connections are established from the outset of a project.

“Social value begins in the planning stages – that’s when we can start seeding connections to build on during construction and occupancy.”

Drawing on his own work, he defined what ‘community’ means and encouraged an inventive approach that goes beyond the minimum requirements.

“Community refers to anyone we impact – that includes project team members, building occupants, nearby workers, visitors, and local residents. To reach beyond standard community engagement, we need to get creative.”



“True social value is reflected in the quality of our relationships and the happiness of those we share space with.”

That could look like commissioning local artists to visit project sites, chat to people about their experiences, needs, and what matters to them, and develop works off the back of those conversations.

Chris stressed how important these informal interactions are for the social value process on major schemes, revealing insights from basic needs like installing seating with backrests, to more complex requirements like access to specific services or professional clothing shops. This type of non-traditional outreach can help developers better understand their sphere of influence and take action where appropriate.

“Social value isn’t just about counting apprenticeships. It’s about going beyond that, driving tangible impact that makes people feel valued and represented in their community.”

Chris advocated for prioritising long-term relationships over short-term, tick-box targets, encouraging collaboration with local groups, educational institutions, and social enterprises to involve communities from the very start of the construction process. He emphasised that social value shouldn’t be an afterthought, but rather something that is embedded from the early planning stages, carried through to occupancy and beyond.

“True social value is reflected in the quality of our relationships and the happiness of those we share space with.”



Tiffany Hepher, Head of Social Value at DP9, on:

The Planning Process Behind Social Value

“Ten years ago, social value policy was in its infancy and focused purely on procurement with the focus on securing apprenticeships and local procurement. Since then, there has been a growing emphasis on embedding social value through the whole lifecycle of the development project.”

Tiffany brings experience from both the public and private sectors, having worked as a Regeneration Officer at the Royal Borough of Greenwich and, more recently, as an Economic Development Consultant. Drawing on this diverse background, she provided an insightful overview of the evolution of social value practices, their influence on the design and delivery of developments, and the opportunities to realistically go beyond policy requirements to maximise impacts in a sustainable way.

“No single development can solve all local issues. A skyscraper won’t necessarily resolve health problems – but it might contribute to a scheme with a third-party organisation that can help.”



Social Value in Planning Policy

Tiffany outlined how the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF) supports identified social value principles, such as building a strong economy, creating healthy communities, and achieving well-designed spaces. However, the NPPF does not include a clear definition of social value. [The London Plan](#) includes principles of the circular economy and good growth. However, it also does not include a definition of social value. The London Sustainable Development Commission (LSDC), part of the Greater London Authority (GLA), has published two research papers exploring how social value can be delivered through development and regeneration. Complementing this work, the GLA has also developed the Social Integration Measurement Toolkit in 2019 to support more inclusive urban planning.

At the borough level, the London Borough of Westminster launched the Fairer Westminster Strategy in 2022, and in May 2025, the City Property Association (CPA) and Westminster Property Association (WPA) jointly released the Social Value in the Built Environment report.

Although the initial draft of the new London Plan does not currently define social value, the growing body of research from both the GLA and London boroughs indicates that a formal definition is likely to be included in future iterations.

Definition of Social Value

Tiffany cited the [Green Building Council's social value framework](#) as a good example of a whole lifecycle approach to social value.

“The definition of social value for a project or place should include an identified group of people impacted by that project or built asset and a set of agreed outcomes which would improve their quality of life, thereby creating social value.”

Tiffany explained the benefit of embedding social value practices at development stage. Like Chris, Tiffany underscored the importance of early-stage engagement and consistent, robust data analysis to

assess and improve practices. Tiffany stressed the importance of establishing a robust quantitative baseline, drawing on diverse data sources such as ONS statistics, credit card spending patterns, and footfall data from platforms like Strava. Equally vital, she noted, is the development of a qualitative baseline through meaningful community engagement, to gain a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and challenges faced by local residents. She underscored the critical need to clearly define the intended beneficiary group within any action plan, ensuring that interventions are meaningfully aligned with community priorities and lead to measurable improvements in quality of life.

“Creating social value on a project means identifying key groups of people and delivering an agreed set of outcomes that will improve their quality of life.”

Tiffany shared practical examples from her own portfolio, including the Waterloo Community Chest – an initiative funded through ringfenced contributions from the London Eye. This fund was established to support local third-sector organisations and has recently been shortlisted for a Building London Planning Award.

“In areas of significant deprivation, establishing a community fund is a proven way for developers to improve people’s lives. Providing emergency support for white goods, school uniforms, and educational initiatives makes a tangible difference.”

Looking ahead, Tiffany referenced the forthcoming [London Plan \(2027–2050\)](#), a comprehensive spatial development blueprint which will help guide the trajectory of London’s built environment over the next 25 years. Highlighting its focus on inclusive growth, improved consultation practices, and potential shift toward impact assessments, she called for clearer definitions, strategic use of community spaces and increased cross-industry collaboration to go beyond standard planning requirements.



Marie-Louise Schembri, Sustainability Director at Hilson Moran:

Comparing International Approaches To Social Value With British Practices

“Sweden focuses on frameworks and planning policies, while the UK has historically emphasised the monetary valuation of social impact.”

Marie-Louise shared valuable insights from her work with Scandinavian colleagues, comparing Sweden’s policy-driven approach to social value with the UK’s focus on financial metrics. Drawing on her research into the design process as a catalyst for social change, she stressed that while financial reporting is essential for investor accountability, many existing social value initiatives are underdelivering because of this myopic approach.

“Most social value initiatives are short-term and procurement-driven, with limited evidence of positive long-term impact.”

Between 2020 and 2023, [The Social Value Portal](#) reported a 650% increase in social value spending driven largely by the Corporate Social Responsibility Directive. On the surface, this seems positive – but Marie-Louise explained how increased investor and regulatory scrutiny of social value in supply chains has raised concerns among developers, who are working to improve transparency and evidence of the impact of their SV spend. They often find [Section 106](#) agreements a burden that does not add meaningful value, while local planning authorities generally consider developer initiatives superficial.

With reference to recent projects in Vancouver and London, Marie-Louise illustrated the importance of early-stage, design-led interventions on projects, emphasising the importance of delving deeper to address broader human needs, such as age and gender, neurodiversity, financial security and cultural inclusion, highlighting affordability challenges and displacement.

The Vancouver project Marie-Louise referred to, Woodward’s Building, a tall tower built in a previously struggling area, retained part of an existing department store and created a mixed-use development with substantial social housing. Detailing the extensive, inclusive consultation undertaken by the project architects, she illustrated the complexity of social value, even on a development where the explicit goal was community revival, not gentrification. The project created new public spaces, plazas and seating areas, with 200 social housing units, a university

annex, and an emphasis on maintaining the area’s cultural identity. However, it ultimately faced criticism for becoming too affluent, too quickly, causing original residents to feel displaced.

Marie-Louise’s second example was the East Village Olympic site in London. Presented as a market-leading high-density, mixed-use residential development, delivering affordable housing and access to Olympic sports facilities, the project was praised for its inclusive consultation and co-design processes. It also featured a ‘prosperity board’, intended to monitor outcomes, and involved community members to track impact. Despite these best intentions, follow-up research revealed that many residents who engaged in early consultations had moved away within a year, because they were unable to afford to live in or fully enjoy the new environment. East Village is still viewed as one of the most successful Olympic legacy sites globally, but on a human level, it highlights the very real challenges associated with creating positive community impact on large-scale developments. This example shows just how far the industry still has to go in terms of creating genuine social value that doesn’t fall at the first hurdle.

“Creating truly inclusive urban developments is a hugely complex, multifaceted task.”

“Many current social value initiatives resemble ‘socialwashing’ – the social value equivalent of greenwashing. Developers can present a marketing narrative without acknowledging the baseline community conditions”

Calling for the development of meaningful frameworks for social value in the UK, inspired by international best practices, Marie-Louise advocated for a more intentional approach, outlining the need for valuing consultation and design contributions, looking at social value generation as transformation rather than compensation.



Tom Cazalet, Development Director at Hines and Paul Hargreaves, Construction Director at Lipton Rogers on:

Social Value in Practice

“On a big development, it’s essential to address social value from the ground up.” – Paul

Drawing on examples from Broadgate to Chiswick Park and 22 Bishopsgate, Paul set the scene, illustrating the current approach to social value in the UK, which is the result of lessons learned from previous developments. Moving on to The Round, a major mixed-use development comprised of three tall towers, which aims to be the first high-rise scheme in the UK to achieve the WELL Community Gold Standard, Paul and Tom discussed innovative approaches to social value on the project.

“Place, people, and economy are the three key principles that inform the design process.” – Tom

Paul and Tom emphasised the importance of generating meaningful social impact, starting with strategies that centre on creating community-focused spaces that go beyond standard planning obligations. Referencing The Round, Tom spoke about Hines’ plans to incorporate 40% of affordable housing and provide 25,000 square feet of Affordable Workspace for charities and community organisations, making sure locals aren’t displaced and will activate the ground floor and podium levels.

“Planning typically requires 10% of commercial space at 75% of market rental value. By reducing rent to a peppercorn rate, it provides genuinely affordable space that will be filled with exciting and engaging socially minded companies and individuals.” – Tom

Something as simple as reimagining entrance spaces to make them more engaging and community-friendly can make a huge difference. This can be done without compromising on essential security, says Tom, and is particularly well received by younger occupants – who are the workforce of the future.

“Social value comes from making meaningful connection between different groups of people, and a good building goes a long way in facilitating that.”

Tom Cazalet

Tom recommended establishing contact with tenant Corporate Social Responsibility teams as a core part of the handover from delivery teams and to help guide development from day one. He also encouraged implementing a structured community impact plan and tenant toolkit to ensure that social value commitments are embedded throughout the construction process with clear, actionable goalposts that will drive benefits even after handover.

“Going the extra mile to give back to communities and champion people makes a huge difference – food, for example, is a brilliant way to bring people together. Developers could create incubator spaces for local chefs to test and grow their businesses.” – Tom

His final recommendation was to use platforms like the Social Value Portal to produce annual impact reports, describing it as a forward-thinking model that offers a scalable blueprint for delivering genuine social impact and ensures we are measuring strategies throughout the asset’s life cycle.

Paul and Tom emphasised the importance of long-term, sustainable local engagement. Their examples proved that thoughtful design and proactive social value strategies can transform urban developments into vibrant, inclusive spaces, to the benefit of stakeholders and communities alike.

This panel discussion shed light on the pressing need to rethink how the industry defines, delivers, and sustains social value in the built environment. Panellists emphasised that genuine, lasting positive impact comes from building long-term relationships within communities and understanding local needs, rather than relying on outmoded planning obligations and short-term targets to provide frameworks. From navigating regulatory challenges to mitigating the pitfalls of gentrification, the discussion highlighted the importance of collaboration and adaptability for far-reaching community engagement. As demand for meaningful social outcomes grows, creating inclusive, flexible strategies that prioritise people and place is more important than ever.



