CJ ASSOCIATES
UNLOCKING INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRESS

KEY INSIGHTS · 05

Securing Social Impact & Community Benefit

Views from the top

Social impact and community benefit have become increasingly prominent within the infrastructure sector. As projects continue to grow in scale, complexity and visibility, expectations are also evolving. Communities, local authorities, developers and policymakers are placing greater emphasis on the wider outcomes that infrastructure projects create for people and places.

Whilst significant progress has been made across the industry, important questions remain. How can projects move beyond commitments and deliver meaningful outcomes? How can communities play a greater role in shaping priorities and defining success? How should social impact and community benefit be measured, governed and embedded throughout the project lifecycle?

To explore these questions, CJ Associates spoke with 30 industry leaders and practitioners from across the infrastructure sector, representing developers, consultants, contractors, local authorities and infrastructure owner organisations. This research identified a number of recurring themes that were later addressed through a collaborative roundtable discussion, the solutions for which are presented hereafter.

The findings reveal a sector that has largely moved beyond asking whether social impact and community benefit matter. Instead, attention is increasingly focused on how they can be delivered consistently, meaningfully and in a way that creates lasting value for communities.

30 Industry leaders & practitioners interviewed

24 Organisations engaged with the research

6 Emerging themes identified

Contributing organisations

From Research to Insight

For the purposes of this report:

> *Social impact refers to the broader and longer-term changes that infrastructure projects create for people, communities and places. This may include outcomes relating to health, wellbeing, inclusion, safety, skills, employment, community resilience, environmental quality and quality of life.*
>
> *Community benefit refers to the specific initiatives, investments and interventions delivered through projects to support local communities. These may include employment and skills programmes, education initiatives, community funding, environmental improvements, cultural activities and targeted support for particular groups or places.*

The relationship between the two is important. Community benefit initiatives are often the mechanisms through which projects seek to create social impact. However, contributors consistently challenged the assumption that success should be measured solely by the activities delivered. Instead, many argued that greater attention should be paid to the outcomes experienced by communities and the difference projects make over time.

The following table summarises the main issues that emerged from this research. These findings were then tested, challenged and further developed through our collaborative industry roundtable, helping to identify the six themes explored throughout this report. Whilst the percentages indicate how frequently particular issues were raised, they should not be interpreted as a measure of importance. Together, the interviews and roundtable discussions provide a robust evidence base for the insights and recommendations that follow.

% of Contributors	Emerging Finding	Key Observation
90%	Gap between ambition and delivery	Strong commitments are made, but delivery often becomes inconsistent post-consent or post-procurement.
85%	Need for earlier integration into projects	Social impact/community benefit should be embedded at the earliest stages of planning and design, not treated as a bolt-on.
80%	Measurement frameworks do not fully reflect lived experience	Concerns raised that standardised frameworks, such as Themes, Outcomes and Measures (TOMs), alongside monetisation and KPI-led approaches, do not always capture meaningful community outcomes.
75%	Lack of clarity or consistency in definitions	Significant variation in how organisations interpret 'social value', 'social impact' and 'community benefit'.
75%	Trust and early engagement are critical	Contributors repeatedly highlighted the importance of trust, transparency and meaningful early engagement.
85%	Need for place-based / community-led approaches	Strong support for approaches shaped around local needs, context and long-term outcomes.
70%	Governance and accountability are unclear	No consistent approach regarding ownership, stewardship or oversight of community benefit delivery.
70%	Current approaches can become procurement or compliance-led	Risk of tick-box behaviour driven by procurement frameworks and contractual requirements.
70%	Long-term legacy is more important than short-term activity	Contributors consistently preferred sustainable, long-term impact over one-off interventions.
60%	Social impact/community benefit reduces project risk	Recognition that good engagement and social impact delivery can reduce opposition, delay and reputational risk.
50%	Capability and maturity vary significantly across organisations	Social impact delivery is still developing unevenly across clients, contractors and consultants.
65%	Funding structures and distribution models are inconsistent	Contributors highlighted wide variation in funding models, governance and allocation approaches.
45%	Projects are increasingly expected to address wider systemic issues	Some contributors highlighted growing expectations around skills, inequality, public services and social mobility.
30%	Project scale can undermine local benefit	Larger procurement models and national delivery structures can reduce local participation and impact.
25%	No single intervention guarantees community acceptance	Community benefit improves relationships but does not automatically remove opposition to development.

THEME 01

From Commitment to Delivery

"Whatever the list of community benefits, if they don't actually deliver positive outcomes for communities, then we've failed."

Paul DiMambro, Social Value Manager, Sustainability, Sizewell C

CHALLENGE

Social impact and community benefit commitments are now commonplace across major infrastructure projects. However, the research identified a recurring concern: how consistently those commitments are translated into meaningful outcomes.

Participants highlighted the challenges of maintaining accountability throughout lengthy project lifecycles. Responsibility for delivery can become fragmented across multiple organisations, contractors and delivery partners, making long-term oversight more difficult.

Questions were also raised about capacity and governance. As the number and scale of infrastructure projects continue to increase, local authorities are often expected to oversee commitments whilst managing significant resource pressures of their own. This creates a risk that delivery becomes harder to monitor and more difficult to assure.

The research also highlighted the realities of delivery. Strong policies, strategies and commitments are important, but their value is ultimately determined by what can be achieved in practice. Projects operate within changing market conditions, competing priorities and commercial pressures, requiring organisations to balance ambition with delivery.

SOLUTIONS

Establish clear ownership from the outset - Responsibility for social impact and community benefit should remain visible throughout the project lifecycle. Clear ownership helps prevent commitments becoming diluted as projects move through planning, procurement, construction and operation.

Embed accountability into governance structures - Projects should regularly review progress against commitments and ensure that delivery remains a standing consideration within programme governance, reporting and decision-making processes.

Focus on outcomes, not activity - Monitoring should move beyond counting activities and seek to understand whether commitments are creating meaningful change for communities. This helps maintain focus on the purpose of delivery rather than simply demonstrating compliance.

Recognise the realities of delivery - Projects operate within changing economic conditions, evolving priorities and resource constraints. Delivery models should therefore be realistic, adaptable and capable of responding to changing circumstances.

Maintain long-term stewardship - Communities experience projects over many years. Effective delivery requires continuity, oversight and a commitment to ensuring benefits continue beyond individual project phases.

CJ ASSOCIATES INSIGHT

Projects devote considerable attention to social impact and community benefit during planning and consenting, but that focus can diminish once projects move into procurement, construction and delivery.

Successful projects treat social impact as a core delivery discipline rather than a standalone commitment. This requires strong leaderhip, clear accountability, effective governance and regular scrutiny throughout the project lifecycle.

By combining planning, stakeholder engagement and programme advisory expertise, we support projects to bridge the gap between ambition and delivery, ensuring that commitments remain visible, measurable and meaningful long after consent has been secured.

THEME 02

Communities Shape Better Decisions

"We need a really solid understanding of what the community needs, wants and is struggling with in that local area."

Anna Sutherland-Bamber, DCO & Planning Director, Iceni Projects

CHALLENGE

Contributors consistently highlighted that meaningful social impact and community benefit begin with understanding the communities that infrastructure projects are intended to serve and impact. Yet too often, priorities, programmes and interventions are designed before projects have developed a robust understanding of local needs, aspirations and lived experience.

Participants reflected on the risks of designing community benefit around assumptions rather than evidence. Whilst many initiatives are well intentioned, standardised approaches do not always reflect the unique characteristics of individual places or the priorities of the people who live there. As a result, projects can miss opportunities to create meaningful and lasting value.

The research also reinforced that communities are not homogeneous. Different groups experience infrastructure in different ways, influenced by factors such as race, age, gender, health, mobility, socio-economic circumstances and local identity. Understanding these perspectives requires meaningful stakeholder engagement that goes beyond consultation and actively informs decision-making.

The challenge for projects is therefore not simply engaging with communities, but ensuring that the insight gained shapes decisions, influences investment and defines what successful outcomes look like.

SOLUTIONS

Invest in stakeholder engagement from the outset – Early engagement provides projects with the opportunity to understand local priorities before key decisions become fixed. Building relationships early enables projects to identify issues, explore opportunities and develop interventions that better reflect community needs.

Replace assumptions with evidence – Community benefit programmes should be informed by robust stakeholder insight rather than predefined packages or standard approaches. Understanding local context enables projects to target investment where it can create the greatest value.

Design solutions around place – Every community is different. Effective social impact and community benefit programmes recognise local identity, respond to specific challenges and reflect the aspirations of the communities they are intended to support.

Enable communities to influence outcomes – Provide genuine opportunities for communities to shape priorities and contribute to decisions that affect them. Projects are more likely to create lasting value when communities help define what success looks like.

Continue listening throughout the project lifecycle – Community priorities evolve over time. Maintaining meaningful dialogue enables projects to respond to changing circumstances, refine their approach and ensure that social impact and community benefit remain relevant throughout delivery.

CJ ASSOCIATES INSIGHT

The value of stakeholder engagement is not measured by the number of conversations held, but by the quality of the decisions those conversations inform.

Effective engagement provides projects with the evidence needed to move beyond assumptions and develop social impact and community benefit programmes that are targeted, proportionate and grounded in local need. It creates a clearer understanding of where investment can make the greatest difference and helps ensure that community priorities are reflected in project decisions.

Projects that define success with communities, rather than for them, are better positioned to build trust, strengthen relationships and deliver outcomes that create lasting value for both communities and infrastructure organisations.

THEME 03

Trust Makes Delivery Possible

"It's about treating people with respect, being clear about what you're planning to do, keeping them informed, and maintaining open communication throughout the process."

Michelle Baker, Fellow and Technical Director Social Value & Stakeholder Engagement, AtkinsRéalis

CHALLENGE

Contributors consistently highlighted the importance of transparency, authenticity and meaningful engagement in building and maintaining relationships with communities.

Participants recognised that communities often bring existing experiences, perceptions and concerns to infrastructure projects. In some cases, previous engagement activities, historic project commitments or wider industry experiences can influence how new proposals are received.

Contributors also emphasised that trust cannot be established through consultation activities alone. Communities increasingly expect projects to communicate openly, explain decisions clearly and demonstrate how feedback has influenced outcomes.

Several participants reflected on the challenges of maintaining trust throughout lengthy project lifecycles. Expectations, project teams and community priorities can all change over time, requiring projects to invest in relationships over time, creating uncertainty and increasing the risk of relationships becoming fragmented or weakened.

SOLUTIONS

Be transparent about decisions and trade-offs - Communities are more likely to trust projects that communicate openly about opportunities, constraints and decision-making processes. Transparency helps manage expectations and creates greater confidence in the integrity of the process.

Demonstrate how engagement has influenced outcomes - People are more likely to remain engaged when they can see how their views have been considered. Providing feedback and explaining how decisions have been reached helps strengthen credibility.

Invest in long-term relationships - Trust develops over time. Maintaining regular dialogue throughout the project lifecycle enables relationships to evolve and creates opportunities to respond to changing circumstances and concerns.

Recognise that disagreement is not failure - Communities will often hold different views about development proposals. Effective engagement focuses on understanding concerns, improving decisions and maintaining constructive relationships, even where differences remain.

Create opportunities for genuine dialogue - Successful engagement moves beyond information sharing. Creating opportunities for listening, discussion and collaboration helps build stronger and more resilient relationships.

CJ ASSOCIATES INSIGHT

Trust is often discussed as a stakeholder engagement issue. In practice, it is a delivery issue.

Projects that enjoy higher levels of trust are typically better positioned to navigate change, manage difficult conversations and maintain constructive relationships when challenges arise.
Trust does not remove disagreement, nor does it guarantee support. However, it can create the conditions for more productive dialogue and more resilient relationships.

The objective is not to eliminate conflict or secure universal agreement. It is to create sufficient confidence in the process, the people and the decision-making to allow conversations to continue, even when perspectives differ.

THEME 04

Measuring What Matters

"It makes the project go beyond just drawings and designs. It brings it back down to what this is really all about."

Petronella Tyson, Principal Consultant, Greengage

CHALLENGE

Contributors expressed widespread concern that current approaches to measuring social impact and community benefit do not always capture what communities experience in practice.

Whilst frameworks, targets and reporting mechanisms play an important role in demonstrating accountability, many participants questioned whether an increasing focus on metrics and monetisation risks overlooking the outcomes that matter most to communities. Several contributors highlighted the challenge of translating complex social outcomes into measurable indicators, particularly where benefits relate to wellbeing, belonging, confidence, culture or community identity.

Participants also reflected on the unintended consequences of measurement. In some cases, reporting requirements can encourage organisations to focus on activities that are easiest to count rather than those most likely to create meaningful and lasting change.

SOLUTIONS

Combine quantitative and qualitative evidence - Data, targets and reporting frameworks provide consistency, but they should be complemented by community feedback, case studies and lived experience evidence to create a fuller understanding of impact.

Focus on outcomes rather than outputs - Projects should look beyond what has been delivered and consider whether activities have created meaningful change for communities over time.

Recognise value beyond monetisation - Not all benefits can be reduced to financial values. Community confidence, pride in place, cultural identity, wellbeing and social capital can all represent important indicators of success.

Use measurement to support learning and improvement - Measurement should help organisations understand what is working, where challenges remain and how future interventions can be strengthened.

Review impact over the long term - Many social outcomes emerge gradually. Long-term monitoring can provide a more realistic understanding of whether community benefit initiatives have delivered lasting value.

CJ ASSOCIATES INSIGHT

Infrastructure projects routinely evaluate cost, programme and technical performance, yet comparatively little attention is given to understanding whether community benefit initiatives have created lasting change. Measuring delivery is important, but measuring legacy could provide a far richer understanding of project success.

There is an opportunity for major infrastructure projects to commission longitudinal community impact studies that evaluate outcomes several years after construction has finished. Understanding which interventions have delivered meaningful and lasting value would create a stronger evidence base for future investment decisions and help continually improve how social impact and community benefit are designed and delivered.

THEME 05

Social Impact as a Core Delivery Discipline

"It's baked into the scheme. It shouldn't be seen as an extra or a nice to have."

Kieran Hyams, Associate Director, Arup

CHALLENGE

Contributors consistently highlighted a shift in how social impact and community benefit are being viewed across the infrastructure sector. What was once often treated as a supplementary activity is increasingly becoming an important consideration in project planning, delivery and governance.

However, the research also revealed significant variation in how organisations approach this agenda. Whilst some have embedded social impact into decision-making, programme management and organisational culture, others continue to treat it as a standalone workstream, contractual requirement or reporting obligation.

Participants reflected on the growing expectations being placed on infrastructure projects by communities, policymakers, clients and investors. Increasingly, organisations are expected not only to deliver assets, but to demonstrate how projects contribute to wider social, economic and environmental outcomes.

The challenge for the sector is therefore not whether social impact and community benefit matter, but how they can be embedded consistently, effectively and proportionately across the full project lifecycle.

SOLUTIONS

Build capability across disciplines - Increasing awareness and understanding across planning, design, engineering, programme management and stakeholder engagement teams can help strengthen delivery and encourage more integrated thinking.

Connect social outcomes to project success - Organisations are increasingly recognising that social impact and community benefit contribute to wider project objectives. Stronger relationships, improved trust, reduced risk and enhanced reputation can all support successful delivery.

Create space for innovation and creativity - Move beyond standardised approaches. New ideas, partnerships and ways of working can help projects respond more effectively to local needs and create more meaningful outcomes.

Learn from emerging good practice - As approaches continue to evolve, organisations should actively share learning, celebrate success and create opportunities to apply lessons from across the sector.

CJ ASSOCIATES INSIGHT

Social impact and community benefit are most effective when they are considered alongside programme, risk, planning, design and stakeholder engagement activities rather than as separate workstreams.

An integrated approach enables project teams to make better decisions, identify opportunities earlier and respond more effectively to community needs and expectations. It also helps create stronger alignment between technical delivery, stakeholder priorities and long-term project outcomes.

For emerging projects, establishing these principles early can create a stronger foundation for delivery. Embedding social impact into decision-making from the outset helps ensure that community benefit is not something that is added later, but something that actively shapes the way projects are planned and delivered.

THEME 06

Every Project Influences the Next

"Every project impacts UK Plc credibility. So remember, we're all part of the narrative now!"

Nicky Wright, Partner, Gardiner & Theobald

CHALLENGE

As projects become more complex, the environment in which they are delivered becomes more challenging. Political priorities shift, funding arrangements evolve and market conditions remain volatile, placing greater pressure on organisations to demonstrate certainty, resilience and long-term value.

In this environment, public confidence cannot be taken for granted. Communities do not experience infrastructure as a series of unrelated projects. Their expectations are shaped by previous consultations, previous commitments and previous experiences. Where projects fail to deliver on their promises or communicate openly, confidence is eroded not only in that scheme, but in those that follow too.

Every infrastructure project contributes to a wider industry narrative. Each project inherits the trust built by those that came before it and, in turn, influences how future projects will be received. Building confidence is therefore no longer solely the responsibility of individual projects; it is a shared responsibility across the infrastructure sector.

SOLUTIONS

Focus on consistency, not perfection – Communities understand that projects evolve and circumstances change. Credibility is not built by getting everything right; it is built by consistently delivering commitments, communicating openly and responding honestly when challenges arise.

Recognise your contribution to the wider narrative – Every project influences how the infrastructure sector is perceived. Organisations should look beyond the boundaries of their own schemes and recognise that today's actions help shape tomorrow's opportunities.

Communicate openly through uncertainty – Political change, funding pressures and evolving priorities are inevitable. Honest, transparent communication helps maintain trust and demonstrates strong leadership, even when circumstances change.

Leave relationships stronger than you found them – Successful projects create more than physical infrastructure. They leave behind stronger partnerships, greater confidence and communities that are more willing to engage with future projects.

CJ ASSOCIATES INSIGHT

The 2nd of our Key Insights reports, ***Delivering Engagement Excellence***, explored the importance of developing compelling narratives that help individual projects build trust and engage communities. This research suggests the conversation has evolved.

Today, communities increasingly judge new infrastructure proposals through the lens of previous experiences. Every engagement, consultation and community commitment contributes to a cumulative narrative that influences confidence in future infrastructure investment.

For organisations delivering major infrastructure, this represents an important leadership opportunity. The organisations that will shape the future of infrastructure are unlikely to be those striving for perfection. They will be those that consistently deliver on commitments, communicate transparently and leave communities with greater confidence than when they arrived.

By focusing on consistency rather than perfection, every project can help shape the next.

A FINAL WORD

Deliver differently

One of the strongest messages to emerge from this report is that our industry already understands the importance of social impact and community benefit. The challenge is no longer convincing people that they matter. It is embedding them into the way projects are conceived, designed and delivered.

For me, this is ultimately a leadership challenge.

It requires organisations to move beyond individual initiatives and consider how decisions are made, how communities influence those decisions, and how success is defined over the lifetime of a project. It also requires the confidence to challenge assumptions, work collaboratively across disciplines and remain focused on outcomes rather than activity.

Infrastructure has always been about creating places, opportunities and connections. The projects that leave the greatest legacy will be those that recognise communities not simply as stakeholders to be engaged, but as partners in shaping successful outcomes.

If this research demonstrates anything, it is that our sector has the knowledge, experience and capability to deliver differently. The opportunity now is to turn that ambition into everyday practice.

Michael Summerfield
Managing Director, CJ Associates

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