Leading Sustainability and Regeneration in Projects[1]

Building Stronger Communities Through Projects: Social Value as a Strategic Driver of Organisational Success[2]

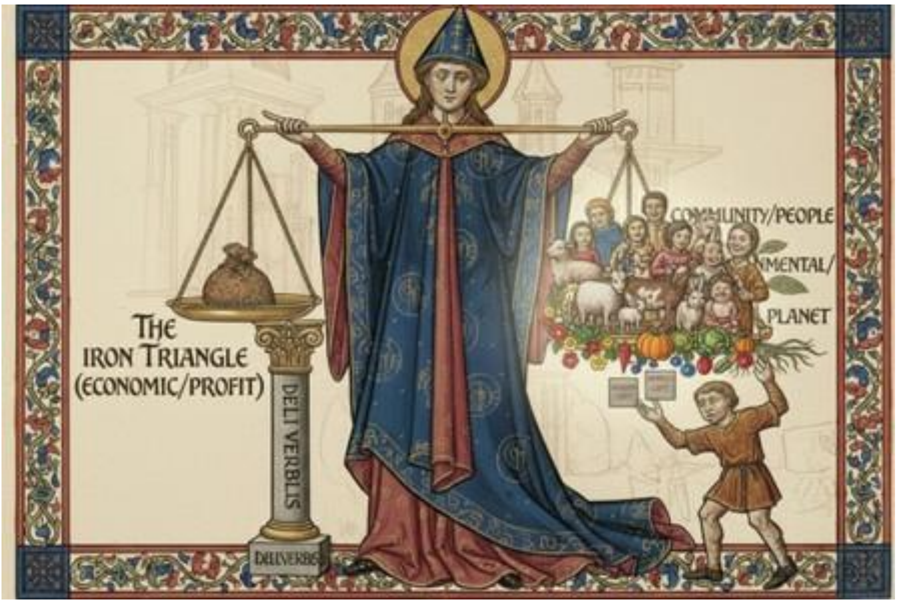

Figure 1 Investing in the community generates greater rewards than seeking financial profit only, and avoided costs can be added to the return on investment. © Hugo Minney

Abstract

Aspirations for a sustainable society often reference the 5 P pillars (people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership). For the purposes of managing projects, we use criteria for success that can be influenced and measured more quickly: planet, prosperity, and split people into two, wellbeing (often internal stakeholders) and community (often external stakeholders). The community pillar is often mischaracterised as merely philanthropic, but we argue it is a critical strategic asset supporting modern project delivery. Cultivating community engagement translates directly into

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enhanced organisational effectiveness, improved profitability, and sustained project success. Using robust quantification methodologies, such as Social Return on Investment (SROI) and avoided cost analysis, we show that it is possible to translate supposedly intangible benefits such as social goodwill into a measurable financial return. This is not just academic. Projects that secure a strong 'Social Licence to Operate' (SLO) effectively mitigate high-impact risks — for example project delays and regulatory or public obstructions — while establishing a reservoir of trust that can be strategically leveraged to facilitate future change requests, project expansions, and long-term legacy development. We establish that investing in community is investing in resilience, proving that ethical commitment is the most profitable path forward.

Keywords: Community Sustainability, Social Value, Social Licence to Operate, Avoided Costs, Project Risk Management, Benefits Realisation, Regenerative Projects, Quantification.

Introduction: The Pivotal Role of the Community Pillar in Regenerative Projects

Contextualizing the four pillars of sustainability

We cannot continue to dig, dump and depart (over-exploit finite resources, pollute, and expect to be able to move on) because there's nowhere left to move on and we've gained a reputation for destruction where we live now. This requires a re-alignment of projects towards sustainability and regeneration, and to achieve this requires a fundamental re-think of how to measure project success. Anyone who has ever sat in a benefits review board knows that the "iron triangle" (Atkinson 1999) only reflects the drivers of project management success, not project success. What people care about — both inside and outside the project — is far broader (Minney 2025c).

United Nations recognises 5 Ps (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership) (Minney 2025a) or areas where we are seeking balanced improvement. Projects need more immediate and causative areas for influence and measurement, and we have proposed that four pillars work well for this: Environmental (Planet), Economic (Prosperity for the nation or region), Community (People in communities), and Human Wellbeing (People as individuals) (Minney 2025d). These 4 pillars are about things a project can influence in the first or second order.

The previous articles in in this series explored the other three pillars, with the November article quantifying the impact of Human Wellbeing, discussing internal human capital dynamics, such as fostering psychological safety, enhancing talent retention, and boosting productivity within the project team (Minney 2025g). This individualistic perspective addresses the flourishing of the internal workforce. We now turn our attention outward to the Community pillar, which concerns the project's contribution to external societal structures, local infrastructure, social cohesion, and the equitable distribution of benefits to collective groups residing near or impacted by the project.

The explicit separation of these two "People" pillars — Community (external social capital) and Human Wellbeing (internal human capital) — is a critical distinction for targeted resource allocation and effective risk management. By treating them distinctly, organisations can develop bespoke strategies for managing the internal workforce (driving efficiency and productivity) while simultaneously developing robust external engagement plans (securing market access and mitigating operational risk). For the project manager, this means actively managing two separate yet synergistic sets of stakeholders: the project team and users of a capability, and the broader external community. Success in fostering internal human capital directly enhances workforce productivity, while cultivating external social capital mitigates risks associated with local opposition, ultimately de-risking the entire project pipeline.

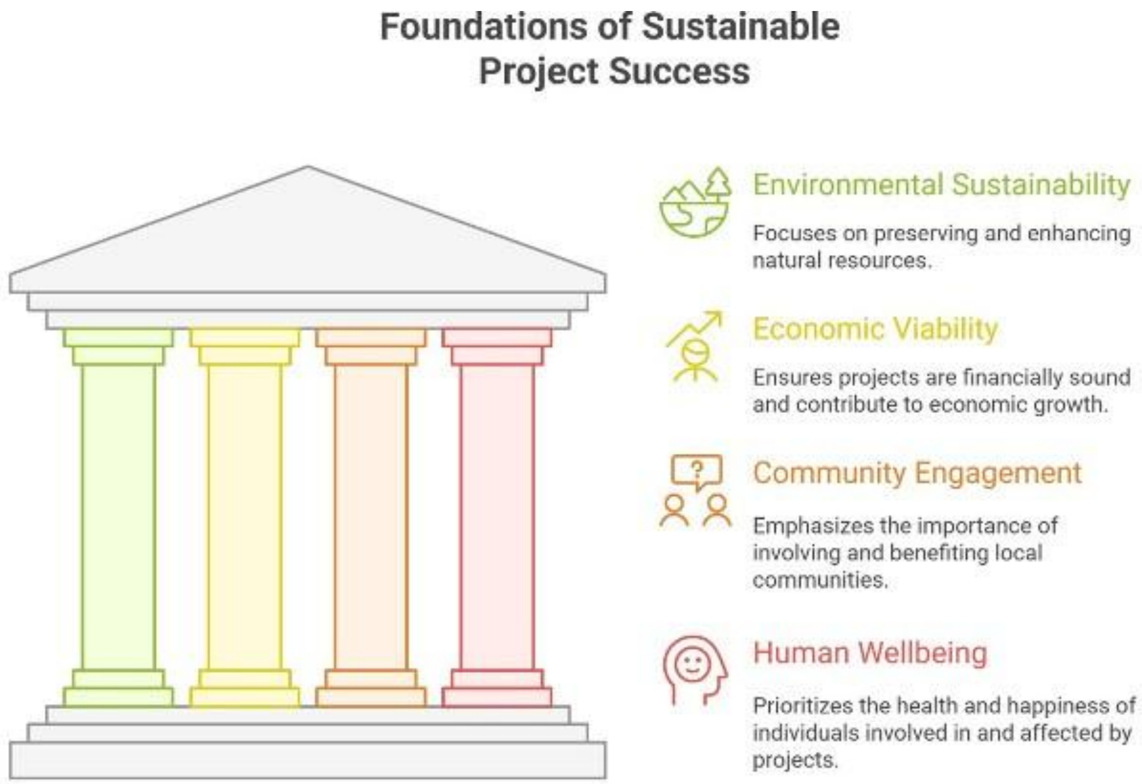

Figure 2 Sustainable projects measure their success using the four pillars: environmental sustainability, economic viability, community engagement and human well-being

The strategic value of community: Beyond mere mitigation

The projects we deliver are rarely isolated; they are embedded within existing communities or ecosystems and must integrate with where they are in a positive way. Infrastructure projects, in particular, are fundamental to society, providing essential systems for transportation, energy supply, clean water, and flood protection (Dobson 2020). The community has a right to expect these projects to go beyond basic functional delivery and generate broader social outcomes. And communities notice. Even the smallest shift — cleaner pathways, jobs for local young people, a new green corridor — changes the conversation long before ground is broken.

The United Kingdom has earmarked substantial investment for infrastructure spending, demonstrating the political recognition of infrastructure's potential to deliver social value (Dobson

2020; HM Treasury 2025). However, a significant gap exists between formal social value policy objectives and the practical delivery of meaningful, beneficial outcomes on the ground (Dobson 2020). This implementation gap is dangerous; if projects consistently fail to realise the promised social value — the fundamental justification for much of the public investment — the government and organisations claiming to deliver these benefits expose themselves to severe reputational damage, eroded stakeholder trust, and the loss of the social acceptance necessary for future projects and operations (Dobson 2020). The project professional must therefore go beyond fulfilling minimal compliance requirements, and actively embed social value criteria at the earliest stages of project conception and throughout project delivery (RICS 2020).

Securing the 'Social Licence to Operate' (SLO) for Project Resilience

Most models posit six groups of stakeholders that organisations should be concerned about (Freeman 1984; Clarkson 1995), and project managers should be aware and take steps to engage with them:

- **Customers** include both those who make use of a new capability or facility, and the general public. We have the ability to pay a price premium for what we like and demand a discount for what we don't like, and to protest and lobby to delay or cancel, at the same time to support and promote to speed a project through.
- **Workers** include both employees and supply chain, and can demand higher compensation to work in a less reputable environment or offer a discount because of the impact on our own reputation (future career aspirations) and in order to be part of something we believe in. But it's not just about compensation – attractiveness or repulsiveness of an employer also impacts the talent pool to recruit from. For the purposes of this definition, I have included suppliers in this group.
- **Investors** potentially have the biggest and most immediate impact on costs. Investors want to get their money back, so will invest in projects likely to succeed, which includes projects less likely to be delayed or cancelled due to public distaste, and where the infrastructure paid for will continue to be useable and not polluted (Minney 2025b).
- **Communities** can have the same impact as customers in terms of protest and promote, and should include future generations in alignment with the Brundtland definition of sustainability (WCED 1987). Some might argue that the environment should be a separate stakeholder: the project manager cannot engage directly and have two-way dialogue therefore this effect is brought to bear by the Community group (and if necessary, expert representatives). The community impact is often felt through the **customer** or **regulator** stakeholders rather than directly.
- **Suppliers** are usually directed through supply chain policies to deliver to certain standards, and may or may not comply.
- **Regulators/ Government** are another important stakeholder (but their requirements are usually defined and documented and already included in the project's constraints.

The focus of this article is on the fourth group, although the lines between the groups are blurred as any and all of the other groups can also form part of the community or ecosystem in which the project is being delivered.

SLO as a measurable risk management asset

The concept of a 'Social Licence to Operate' (SLO) defines the ongoing acceptance and approval granted to an operation or development by local stakeholders (Lansbury 2014). Although originating in sectors prone to conflict such as the mining industry, SLO principles are now applied universally to any project involving significant public impact, including major infrastructure, energy, and housing developments (Lansbury 2014).

In practice, I've found that the term itself matters less than what people feel. If a community senses that they are being sidelined, even unintentionally, that discomfort eventually shows up as cost, delay, or public challenge.

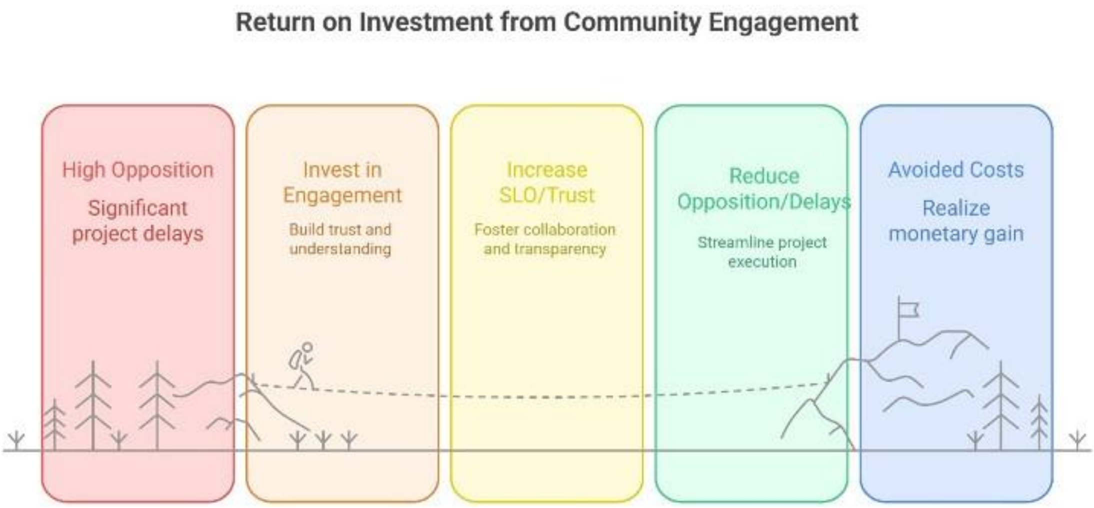

Figure 3 investing in community yields a return in avoided costs

From a business perspective, SLO is treated as a critical element of **business risk management** (Lansbury 2014). Local stakeholders hold considerable, quantifiable power: they can leverage opposition to **delay or even prevent projects** entirely (Lansbury 2014). When contentious infrastructure projects, such as wind farms or port expansions (Lansbury 2014; van de Grift and Cuppen 2022), face community resistance, the primary threat is to core project metrics: schedule and budget (Lansbury 2014; van de Grift and Cuppen 2022). Prolonged legal battles, planning appeals, and sustained protests directly translate into extended overhead costs, increased financial carrying charges, and delays in achieving the benefits realisation date.

Projects like the **A303 Stonehenge road tunnel** and **High Speed 2 (HS2)** are some of the largest examples of the financial reality of stakeholder resistance. When major infrastructure projects face protracted community and political opposition, this resistance translates directly into financial and schedule overruns. The A303 Stonehenge road tunnel, intended to improve traffic flow and protect the World Heritage Site from the noise and pollution of nearly 20,000 vehicles a day (DfT 2013), was ultimately cancelled after repeated delays, with the cost of scrapping the tunnel calculated at almost **£200 million so far** (Elliman 2024). This demonstrates how opposition can entirely derail nationally significant schemes (Morby 2024). The delays and complex political concessions necessary to maintain momentum on HS2 illustrate the same message, manifesting through repeated planning objections and the threat of judicial review. The project frequently encountered compromises and re-scoping to avoid crippling judicial reviews and protracted legal challenges (Hansard 2025). The estimated costs to complete Phase 1 of HS2 rose by a staggering 134% in real terms over the 10 years 2012-2022, and the total estimated spend on the cancelled phases was later limited to the Phase 1 cost plus **£2.2 billion of sunk costs** (Tetlow and Pattison 2023; BBC 2024). Investment in genuine community consent is a form of insurance against the enormous costs of failure and delay.

I saw this dynamic during my time working with a large Arms-Length Body (ALB: government-owned organisation to deliver a specific activity). The ALB is in a rural area and is the dominant employer. It struggled for years with recruitment, and whereas I argued that we needed more employers in the area, HR colleagues were understandably cautious, fearing that competition would stretch the workforce even thinner. But informal feedback from candidates told us that they hesitated to relocate because they worried about staking their family's future on one dominant employer. More employers (achieved between 2020 and 2024 as additional employers moved into the region attracted by government grants) meant the ALB's recruitment challenges eased, without eroding its Social License to Operate.

This operational reality frames community engagement funding not as charity, but as a proactive form of **risk mitigation premium** (Lansbury 2014; Minney 2025d). The investment required for transparent, robust, and ongoing community engagement is marginal when compared to the catastrophic financial costs associated with opposition (Lansbury 2014). When successfully implemented, achieving SLO acts as a financial hedge against uncertainty. If effective community relations prevent a nine-month planning appeal from occurring, or shorten a delay due to public protest by two months, that time saving can be directly monetized as a considerable **avoided cost**, justifying the expenditure in the initial business case (Minney 2025d).

Leveraging community goodwill to streamline planning and market access

Beyond mitigating direct operational risks, a demonstrated commitment to community social value provides distinct advantages for planning and delivery. Projects that proactively build social value gain a **competitive advantage in securing planning consent** (Corfe and Pardoe 2022; Lang 2025). Local authority planners and council members are increasingly mandated to ensure that development proposals address wider community needs and align with strategic social and economic policies, understanding the direct link between policy and development outcomes (WMCA 2017). Projects that integrate these concerns demonstrate superior strategic alignment and responsiveness, smoothing the path through regulatory approvals (WMCA 2017).

In commercial terms, focusing on community benefits can directly enhance asset profitability. Research in the real estate sector suggests that properties designed to incorporate and demonstrate measurable social value can experience a **market value uplift of up to 5%** (Corfe and Pardoe 2022). This uplift is a direct consequence of meeting the growing market demand for sustainable and socially responsible investments, often termed environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance (Corfe and Pardoe 2022), although the five pillars (and SDGs) are probably more tangible and more manageable than ESG.

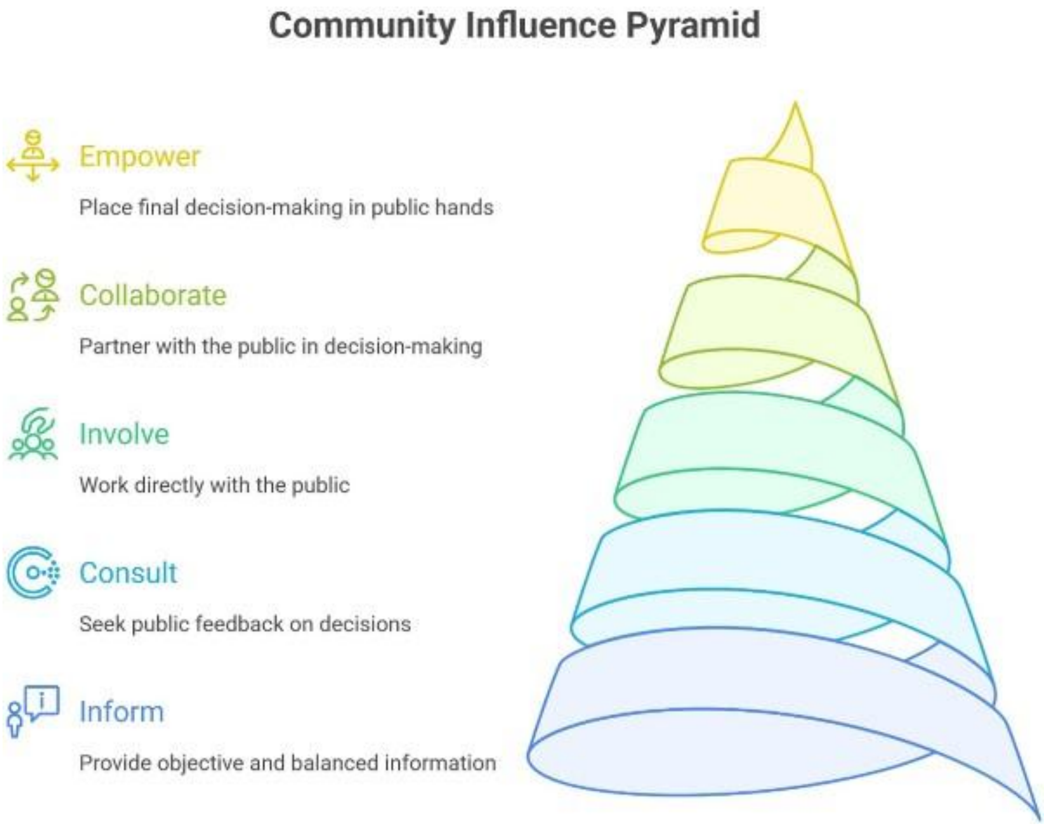

Figure 4 with each level of engagement, the returns to both project and community improve

Thus, effective community strategy yields a dual financial benefit: it is both a tool for **avoided cost** (by accelerating planning consent, shortening the regulatory timeline, and reducing the incidence of legal challenges) (Corfe and Pardoe 2022) and a mechanism for **increased revenue or capital value** (evidenced by the potential 5% market uplift in property values) (Corfe and Pardoe 2022). Project managers must calculate and present both the reduced expenditure from mitigating delay and the enhanced capital value in the initial business case to justify comprehensive community investment, proving that ethical commitment is a foundation for profitability.

Principles of genuine community engagement

Securing the Social Licence to Operate requires moving past transactional consultation to establish relationships founded on **open communication, listening, and mutual respect** (Sash 2024). Strong community engagement is vital for building lasting relationships and trust, leading to a loyal, supportive community that champions the project (Swarm 2025).

The principles developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) stress the necessity of **culturally adaptive standards** and core values to guide the public participation process globally (IAP2 2020). This is encapsulated in the participatory planning approach, which ensures that all stakeholders' voices are heard and respected in the decision-making process (Univ Kansas 2024). Participation instils **feelings of ownership** within the community, establishing a strong foundation of local buy-in for the project's activities and outcomes (Univ Kansas 2024).

Participatory planning is organised into ascending levels of engagement, each granting greater power and responsibility to the community (Univ Kansas 2024):

- **Information:** The basic requirement is to inform local people about the plans in development (Univ Kansas 2024).
- **Consultation:** Providing options and soliciting formal feedback from the community (Univ Kansas 2024).
- **Deciding Together:** Actively encouraging stakeholders to contribute additional ideas and collaborating with them to determine the optimal way forward (Univ Kansas 2024).
- **Acting Together:** Establishing genuine partnerships where different interests collaborate not only on the plan but also in its execution (Univ Kansas 2024).
- **Supporting Independent Initiatives:** Providing structured frameworks, such as grants or advice, to help the community achieve its own independently identified goals, aligning with the project's strategic objectives (Univ Kansas 2024).

3. Quantifying Social Impact: The Compelling Business Case for Avoided Costs

The most rigorous way to justify community investment is to monetise the intangible social benefit as a tangible avoided cost or enhanced effectiveness benefit. Rigour is necessary when presenting a business case – the point of a benefits case is that it stands up to challenge, maintains your reputation, and ensures that the right information is available at the point of decision.

3.1 Monetising social outcomes through established frameworks

"Non-market goods and services" lack a conventional market price, and can therefore be ignored in conventional project prioritisation (Social Value Portal Ltd 2019). Putting a price on them for ROI purposes relies on adapting robust cost-benefit analysis (CBA) and appraisal techniques drawn from public sector guidance, such as the UK Treasury Green Book (Social Value Portal Ltd 2019; HM Treasury 2025). It sounds abstract — but project managers do this instinctively when we argue for investment in safety, training or community benefits. SROI simply gives us a structured way to justify what we already know is valuable.

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is the leading methodology for achieving this, and its framework provides a powerful tool for the realisation of benefits (Minney 2016). SROI calculates a benefit-cost ratio by systematically identifying and monetizing non-market outcomes (Nicholls et al. 2012). The ultimate purpose of SROI is to provide a comprehensive framework for "accounting for value" that goes beyond traditional profit metrics, aiming specifically to reduce inequality and environmental degradation (SVUK 2016).

Figure 5 the SROI or Social Value process demonstrates a chain of causality or logic chain which allows the project manager to determine what to do in order to achieve the desired results (benefits for all parties)

A core component of SROI is the **Avoided Cost Analysis (ACA)** (Nicholls et al. 2012). This technique calculates the precise financial savings that the public sector (society) realises when a negative social outcome — such as criminal recidivism, long-term unemployment, or chronic health issues — is prevented by a project intervention (Social Value Portal Ltd 2019). This method translates preventative social spending into hard currency savings for governments and public finances.

We recognise that quantifying social value can be challenging, as social value is inherently subjective and variable (Mulgan 2010). However, in project and portfolio governance, decisions regarding resource allocation are typically dominated by hard financial data. By embracing SROI and ACA, project managers use validated **proxy measures** — such as the calculated cost of an emergency room visit (Jones et al. 2025), the monetary value of healthy life years gained (Knapp, McDaid, and Parsonage 2011), or the cost of ongoing public welfare payments — to provide the necessary financial data (Moody and Littlepage 2013; SVUK 2016). This professional judgement ensures that a wider, more inclusive definition of value can be consistently and credibly accounted for, influencing strategic allocation decisions in favour of community investment (SVUK 2016; Social Value Portal Ltd 2019).

Avoided costs in health and welfare

Project interventions focused on community improvement often intersect with public health and welfare, generating significant and quantifiable avoided costs for society (Knapp, McDaid, and Parsonage 2011; MHF 2022). In **Mental Health**, project initiatives aimed at improving social cohesion and employment prospects can mitigate substantial societal costs. Mental health issues contribute to long-term disabilities that burden economies (MHF 2022); projects that reduce stress and improve quality of life can quantify their value through the monetization of healthy life years gained and the resulting savings in public health and welfare expenditure (Knapp, McDaid, and Parsonage 2011; Drake and Wallach 2020).

For many in the community, the most significant mental health benefit is derived from having **purpose**, often secured through employment or the hope of gaining employment (Drake and Wallach 2020; Minney 2025e). Community support programmes, such as **TimeBanking**, have demonstrated that by fostering social capital and participation, they deliver significant improvements in mental wellbeing (Timebanking_UK 2020, 2022). Members of such schemes report feeling more connected to their community, experiencing reduced loneliness, and reporting a lift in mood or reduced depression (Timebanking_UK 2020). This sense of purpose and connection mitigates the substantial societal costs associated with mental health issues, translating into quantifiable savings in public health and welfare expenditure (Knapp, McDaid, and Parsonage 2011).

When discussion **Welfare and Education**, community support programmes (which may involve local skills transfer or mentorship) can quantify benefits through the prevention of social costs (Richmond 2025). For example, these programmes can calculate the value derived from a reduction in student absenteeism, the increased probability of students completing academic grades, and the indirect economic benefit stemming from parents re-entering the workforce as a result of accessible local support (Richmond 2025).

The link between fair wages and organisational effectiveness

The Community and Human Wellbeing pillars are somewhat synergistic, particularly where community demands intersect with employment needs such as the requirement to recruit locally (Minney 2025d). Advocating for and implementing fair labour policies, such as paying a living wage, or offering education, immediately generates strategic avoided costs for the organisation, directly enhancing internal effectiveness.

Organisations implementing a living wage policy consistently experience **lower staff turnover** among employees (Thompson and Chapman 2006; Heery, Nash, and Hann 2023). When employees feel appropriately compensated, the stability of the human capital base improves. One study demonstrated a remarkable **57% drop in turnover** among home-care workers following the implementation of a living wage ordinance (Thompson and Chapman 2006; Heery, Nash, and Hann 2023).

This stability reduces the expense and disruption associated with churn. Anyone who has managed a team through a period of high turnover will recognise this immediately — the constant retraining, the loss of tacit knowledge, the way momentum quietly drains away, it gets expensive. Previous research indicates that replacing a single managerial employee can cost between one to two times their annual salary (Midlands Technical College 2022). Therefore, the decrease in turnover resulting from fair pay acts as a powerful offset. Analysis of one living wage ordinance showed that the decrease in turnover alone offset **16% of the total cost** of implementing the wage policy (Thompson and Chapman 2006; Heery, Nash, and Hann 2023).

The support of the local community (and by implication, its stability) is critical for large, long-term employers, especially Arms-Length Bodies like the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) (Univ Aberdeen 2025). For these organisations, success requires a stable, skilled, local workforce to ensure operational continuity over decades. When major industrial sites, such as Dounreay, wind down after years of high-skilled employment, the project manager must embed a **Just Transition** strategy to prevent socio-economic uncertainty and brain drain (Univ Aberdeen 2025). This proactive approach ensures that the local workforce is reskilled for new economic opportunities, guaranteeing that working-age people remain in the vicinity to support the organisation's long-term workforce needs (Univ Aberdeen 2025). This investment directly protects the organisation's viability by reducing future recruitment costs and knowledge loss. It also ensures that the local community feels positively towards the organisation, which impacts on everything else they do, representing one part of the Social License to Operate (SLO).

Leveraging Goodwill for Future Change and Strategic Advantage

It is one thing to recognise the advantages of working with the community, and passively accept them, but another to take this knowledge and leverage it to achieve advantage. Organisations that recognise this difference are proactive – champions of sustainability rather than complying only with the bare minimum regulations, and the rewards are substantial (Minney 2025f, 2025e).

The UK Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 framework

Government policy, particularly in public procurement, establishes a mandatory framework for recognising the value of social investment, investment in the local community, within all substantial government spending. The UK's Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 (UK Government 2012) requires relevant public authorities to consider how the services being procured might **improve the social, economic, and environmental wellbeing** of the area, and modified by some Procurement Policy Notices (CO 2012; Social Enterprise UK 2013).

Although the Act technically applies only to services procured above certain thresholds (Social Enterprise UK 2013), supplementary Procurement Policy Notes (PPNs) have expanded this scope to central government contracts (CO, DCMS, and DDCMS 2020; CO 2025a; Minney 2025c). This policy aims to shift the focus away from simply achieving the lowest cost and towards procuring for **outcomes**, enabling better results for less overall expenditure (UK Government 2012; CO 2025b). The framework actively encourages procurement strategies that can facilitate greater participation from local businesses and social enterprises, such as co-commissioning services or breaking requirements into smaller contract lots (CO 2025b).

This legislative mandate acts as a driver for social innovation. The policy explicitly recognises that specifications informed by social value criteria can lead to solutions that are both **innovative and cost-effective** (CO 2025b). This echoes the principles of the Porter Hypothesis, previously discussed in this series (RFF 2011; Wikipedia 2024; Minney 2025e), which posits that demanding environmental or social constraints (regulations) often compel innovation that ultimately exceeds the cost of compliance (Porter and van der Linde 1995). For project managers, the strategic goal is to utilise the constraints imposed by the Act to generate competitive financial advantages through novel operational efficiencies or creative local resource optimisation.

Building a strategic reservoir of goodwill for long-term projects

For complex, large-scale projects, particularly those involving multi-generational risk or time horizons, community goodwill serves as an essential strategic reserve. This social capital is necessary to ensure operational continuity and the ability to execute sensitive, high-impact changes years or decades into the future.

The development of the UK's **Geological Disposal Facility (GDF)** programme is a compelling example of this strategic investment. The GDF is planned to evolve over an operational lifetime exceeding *100 years*, requiring immense flexibility and long-term acceptance for site development and expansion (NWS 2024; Duncan 2025). To secure this multi-generational Social Licence to Operate (SLO), the developer (Nuclear Waste Services) provides significant, ongoing **Community Investment Funding (CIF)**. Communities involved in the initial evaluation phase receive up to £1 million annually, which increases substantially to **£2.5 million per year** once deep borehole investigations begin (NWS 2025). And it needs to feel like genuine partnership — not a transactional exchange.

This substantial annual funding is directly linked to a collaborative process of developing a **Community Vision**, ensuring that long-term benefits align precisely with local aspirations, such as improved transport links, enhanced health provision, or increased skills capacity (NWS 2024, 2025). The payment, therefore, is not merely a gesture; it is a dedicated budget line item that **purchases flexibility and continuity** (NWS 2025). This continuous, quantifiable investment in goodwill creates a strategic reservoir of acceptance, enabling the project to execute necessary future project changes (such as site expansion, technology updates, or new phases of investigation) that would otherwise be susceptible to local political veto or legal challenge (NWS 2025). The project manager must ensure this long-term investment is budgeted as the necessary cost of mitigating future political and social resistance, guaranteeing the ability to proceed with inevitable change requests throughout the asset's lifecycle (Walkinshaw 2024).

Building this goodwill is essential for securing acceptance for operational changes, not just physical infrastructure. For example, my own experience in North Tyneside showed that when opening an Out of Hours medical facility for extended evening hours, local community support was vital. Proactively engaging with the closest affected residents via local councillors secured their support, because the organisation had already built a relationship of trust through sustained community activity. This pre-emptive action turned potential opposition (such as noise and traffic concerns) into proactive support, allowing the necessary operational change to proceed smoothly and quickly.

Leveraging infrastructure projects for regional regeneration

Projects that are intentionally designed to address regional economic transition can generate long-term social value by mitigating local economic uncertainty and building enduring capacity (Univ Aberdeen 2025).

In areas historically reliant on large, single-industry employers, such as nuclear decommissioning sites like Dounreay, the winding down of the central institution (which has provided stable, high-skilled employment since the 1950s) creates significant socio-economic uncertainty (Univ Aberdeen 2025). Project decommissioning in this context becomes a mandate for a **Just Transition** (Univ Aberdeen 2025). This involves leveraging the existing skilled workforce and regional interest in renewable energy resources to drive economic diversification and build future skills capacity, transforming an economic closure risk into a regeneration opportunity (Univ Aberdeen 2025). The alternative would be a rapid brain-drain with low likelihood of recovery.

As well as the site at Dounreay, an excellent example of this proactive approach is **Sunderland Software City** (Dunn et al. 2013). This project focused on developing the people, infrastructure, and entrepreneurial culture necessary to create and sustain a software industry in the North East of England (Dunn et al. 2013). The measurable impact has been substantial, including advising over 1,000 digital tech SMEs and engaging more than 20,000 students in careers programmes since 2013 (Sunderland Software City 2025). This activity actively regenerates local economic capacity, ensuring that project outputs lead to sustained regional prosperity rather than temporary activity.

From Delivery to Legacy: Embedding Social Value Across the Project Lifecycle

The imperative of early integration

Embedding social value requires a commitment that begins early; value creation won't happen if planning is deferred until the construction or procurement stages, and late-stage planning is a common shortcoming observed under a narrow interpretation of the Social Value Act (Dobson 2020). Too often, I work on projects where the decisions have already been locked in before the social value aspects can be added, almost as an afterthought, by which time the constraints limit what can be achieved. Early planning assures the long-term benefits across the entire asset lifespan, but early planning means that the project manager must engage stakeholders and integrate social objectives during design rather than just delivery (RICS 2020).

This requires social value to be treated as a **core design constraint** (RICS 2020). Just as environmental targets inform the selection of low-carbon materials, social objectives — such as mandatory local accessibility features, community space provision, or sustainable transport integration — must guide concept development. This foundational step ensures that project planning prioritises **broader social outcomes**, rather than being narrowly constrained to functional engineering outputs (Dobson 2020).

Strategies for long-term community asset creation

Truly regenerative projects are those that move beyond mitigation to create sustainable, lasting contributions that enhance the social fabric and economic stability of the host community (Minney 2025d).

Physical Infrastructure and Facilities: Projects often have the opportunity to generate permanent social value through the creation or transformation of physical assets (IAEA 2008). Examples include the construction of cultural venues, sports complexes, or technological centres, sometimes leveraging land or existing facilities post-decommissioning (IAEA 2008). For instance, the decommissioning of the Vandellòs I Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Spain included the creation of the Mestral technological centre as a lasting positive social legacy, transforming industrial assets into knowledge resources (IAEA 2008).

Knowledge Transfer and Skills: High-tech projects and long-term decommissioning programmes carry a responsibility for knowledge management (Univ Aberdeen 2025). Projects, such as Sunderland Software City and nuclear decommissioning initiatives, must implement robust **knowledge exchange models** and dedicated career programmes (Sunderland Software City 2025; Univ Aberdeen 2025). This ensures that project-specific expertise and high-value skills are retained locally and strategically applied to new, diversified economic opportunities, thereby preventing a costly regional 'brain drain' when the project concludes (Univ Aberdeen 2025).

Case study: The Brent Cross Town Flourishing Index

The **Brent Cross Town** regeneration project in London provides an advanced model for embedding quantifiable social value into large-scale development (UKGBC 2022). This £7 billion scheme, which includes 6,700 new homes, is proactively leveraging innovative, transdisciplinary research to develop a **'Flourishing Index'** (Brent Council 2009; UKGBC 2022).

The index is designed to inform the project's social value targets and guide the subsequent Social Value Delivery Plan (UKGBC 2022). The project employs **"before and after" data collection**, which goes beyond simple post-occupancy surveys to rigorously capture the **additionality** — the precise net positive change — created by the intervention (UKGBC 2022). This detailed analysis is unique, providing a deep understanding of the project's real impact on local people and stakeholders (UKGBC 2022).

The project aims for radical transparency by making all anonymised data **open source** (UKGBC 2022). This commitment, coupled with the rigorous pre- and post-development data collection, establishes an undeniable foundation of **long-term community trust** and accountability (UKGBC 2022). This transparency significantly strengthens the Social Licence to Operate (SLO), ensuring that the goodwill needed to navigate the inevitable challenges and change requests across the multi-year development timeline is readily available, mitigating political risk (UKGBC 2022).

Quantification Methodologies: Calculating the Return on Social Investment

Principles and methods for avoided cost analysis

Justifying community investment requires robust quantification methodologies that transform non-market values into financially relevant terms. This relies on utilising established techniques like the **Avoided Cost Methodology** and adapting cost-benefit analyses as used in public sector appraisals (Social Value Portal Ltd 2019).

The most comprehensive framework is **Social Return on Investment (SROI)**, which monetizes non-market outcomes to create a financial equivalent and financial ratio (Nicholls et al. 2012). The SROI framework provides a powerful tool for the realisation of benefits (Minney 2016). This is achieved by linking inputs and outputs to outcomes, and then applying validated financial proxies for those outcomes (Moody and Littlepage 2013). The monetary values attached to these outcomes, such as the calculated **cost of an emergency room visit** (Moody and Littlepage 2013) or the savings from a **reduced welfare support burden**, are often backed by public sector guidelines, including the UK Treasury Green Book (HM Treasury 2025) and the **Unit Costs of Health and Social Care Manual** published by the Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU) (Jones et al. 2025).

The British Standards Institution (BSI) has published guidance, **BS 8950:2020: Guide to enhancing social value**, which provides a framework for understanding, measuring, and reporting social value (BSI 2020). This standard builds on existing principles, including those from Social

Value International, and focuses on the rigorous collection and use of appropriate data for making decisions about social outcomes and determining the **materiality** of impacts (BSI 2020).

Project managers can also leverage methods used for valuing environmental benefits to assess social value (Minney 2025d). **Stated Preference Methods**, such as asking stakeholders for their **Willingness To Pay (WTP)** or **Willingness To Accept (WTA)** compensation for a change, can be used to value benefits like improved air quality or access to new green spaces. Similarly, **Revealed Preference Methods** analyse observable behaviour to infer value, such as comparing employee retention rates between teams engaged in wellbeing programmes versus control groups, providing quantifiable evidence of the value of engagement (a key crossover from the Human Wellbeing pillar) (Minney 2025d).

The importance of proportionality and materiality

A frequent critique of social value measurement is that it is perceived as too complex, resource-intensive, or costly to implement effectively (Mulgan et al. 2019; van de Grift and Cuppen 2022; Rafat 2024). This is where the core project management benefits principles of **proportionality** and **materiality** become essential (BSI 2023).

The effort expended on measurement must be proportional to the value of the decision being informed (BSI 2023). Attempting to measure every minor social ripple effect leads to excessive cost, measurement fatigue, and institutional resistance (Mulgan et al. 2019; van de Grift and Cuppen 2022; Rafat 2024). Instead, project managers should adhere to the principle of **materiality**, focusing the analysis exclusively on the social outcomes that are most significant and relevant to the project's stakeholders and strategic goals (BSI 2023). The BSI guidance reinforces this, noting that measuring social value requires determining **materiality** to ensure the analysis is meaningful (BSI 2020).

Project professionals must be able to justify their quantification approach, particularly when employing SROI, which is often critiqued for its reliance on proxy values and underlying assumptions (Fujiwara 2015). The project manager can defend this methodology by emphasising its *purpose*: to inform resource allocation decisions aimed at reducing social inequality, in a world where hard accounting metrics otherwise ignore social costs (SVUK 2016). Thus, the reliance on validated financial proxies is viewed as a necessary **professional judgement** required to provide a comparable, financial language for social benefits that can compete with traditional cost metrics (SVUK 2016).

Table 1 Examples of activities and their enhanced effectiveness

Community/Social Intervention	Avoided Cost or Enhanced Effectiveness	Quantification Metric Example
Fair Wage / Living Wage Policy	Reduced staff turnover, preserving institutional knowledge (Thompson and Chapman 2006; Heery, Nash, and Hann 2023)	57% drop in turnover (home-care workers); Replacement cost avoidance (1-2x annual salary); Turnover decrease offset 16% of wage policy cost (Thompson and

Community/Social Intervention	Avoided Cost or Enhanced Effectiveness	Quantification Metric Example
		Chapman 2006; Heery, Nash, and Hann 2023)
Successful SLO / Engagement	Reduced project delays, litigation risk, and political risk (Lansbury 2014)	Reduced planning approval time (Corfe and Pardoe 2022); Avoided cancellation costs (e.g., A303 Stonehenge £200m sunk cost) (Elliman 2024); Avoided HS2 cost escalation (Phase 1 up 134% in real terms) (Tetlow and Pattison 2023)
Local Skills/Apprenticeship Programs	Increased regional human capital and reduced welfare burden (Richmond 2025)	Monetary value of reduced unemployment benefits (Knapp, McDaid, and Parsonage 2011); Increased local supply chain resilience
Social Value in Real Estate Projects	Higher market acceptance and faster planning consent (Corfe and Pardoe 2022)	Property market value uplift (up to 5%) (Corfe and Pardoe 2022); Higher success rate in securing planning consent (WMCA 2017)
Long-Term Community Investment (CIF)	Enables future change requests and mitigates political risk over asset lifecycle (NDA GDF) (NWS 2024; Walkinshaw 2024)	Cost of annual CIF investment (£1m - £2.5m per year) (NWS 2024; Walkinshaw 2024) vs. the avoided cost of mid-lifecycle project stoppage or failure to expand (NWS 2024; Walkinshaw 2024)

The Challenges of Implementation and the Path to Genuine Social Regeneration

Navigating the implementation gap and structural hurdles

The persistent gap between social value policy and tangible delivery presents a challenge (Dobson 2020) that project managers must recognise and address. This challenge is perpetuated by specific structural and cultural hurdles.

Structural and Knowledge Challenges: Social issues are inherently complex and interconnected, complicating efforts to isolate and measure the impact of any singular project intervention (Mulgan et al. 2019; Rafat 2024). This complexity is compounded by a lack of universally accepted, standardised metrics for social outcomes, which makes benchmarking and aggregating data across different projects difficult (Mulgan et al. 2019; van de Grift and Cuppen 2022; Rafat 2024). Genuine social change takes many years or even decades to manifest fully, creating a misalignment with project sponsors who typically demand short-term returns on investment (Mulgan et al. 2019; Rafat 2024). Other operational hurdles include the widespread absence of effective processes for evaluating social value during the tendering process and post-contract review, alongside a general lack of knowledge and efficacy among practitioners regarding social value measurement and delivery techniques (van de Grift and Cuppen 2022).

Overcoming tokenism and focusing on additionality

To achieve genuine social regeneration, project efforts must move beyond superficial activities for compliance. The focus must be on generating **additionality** — the net positive change that would not have occurred without the specific project intervention (UKGBC 2022).

Demonstrating additionality requires rigorous, evidence-based measurement. Projects must commit to collecting **"before and after" data** to accurately capture the incremental change generated. An example is illustrated in **Figure 6**, the repurposing of waste ground as a games space. The baseline (what would have happened if the project didn't happen) shows that people continue to enjoy the amenity for dog walking until it becomes too overgrown to be useful, when the amenity value starts to drop. Use for games gets off to a slow start but grows over time. The additionality is the difference between the project value and the baseline. A community skills programme in a rural village will have very different outcomes — and very different expectations — from a similar programme in an inner-city area. Treating them as interchangeable guarantees disappointment.

In order to calculate project value, baseline and therefore additionality for community enhancements, various indices of quality of life have been proposed, such as the Brent Cross Town Flourishing Index and Gross National Happiness (Brent Council 2009; Costanza et al. 2009; UKGBC 2022; GNH n.d.).

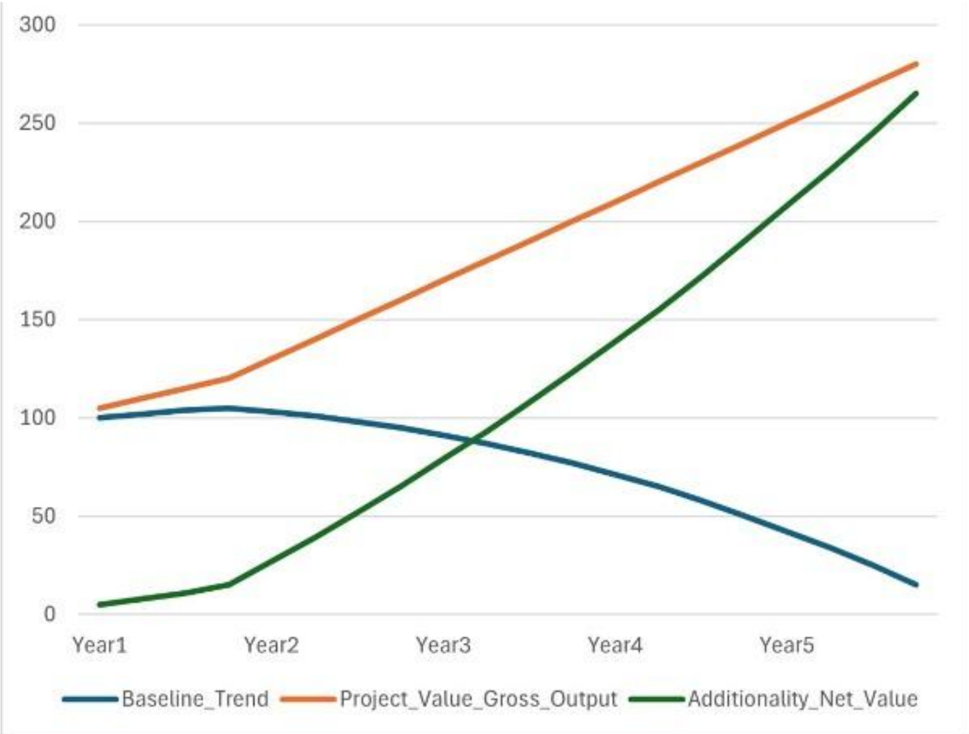

Figure 6 additionality – the difference between what the project delivers, and what would have been achieved anyway without the project

A critical requirement for success is ensuring **contextual sensitivity** (Mulgan et al. 2019; Rafat 2024). Generic, "one-size-fits-all" social value prescriptions often fail because they ignore local cultural norms, socio-economic conditions, and pre-existing needs (Mulgan et al. 2019; Rafat 2024). When interventions fail to align with local context, they are exposed to significant risks, including reputational damage and the loss of the hard-won Social Licence to Operate. Project managers must mandate culturally sensitive engagement, requiring deep local partnership (e.g. working with local authorities, charities, and community bodies) rather than imposing a generic, one-size-fits-all solution (Mulgan et al. 2019; Rafat 2024).

Conclusion: Projects as Engines of Socio-Economic Regeneration

The perceived trade-off between project efficiency and community support is a false dichotomy. By embracing the Community Pillar of sustainability in project management, project managers transform nice-to-have qualitative benefits into a social commitment that is measurable. We can even put a Financial Equivalence price on it!

We have demonstrated that community goodwill (Social Licence to Operate) is a form of financial capital, yielding returns through **avoided costs** — faster planning consent (Corfe and Pardoe 2022; Lang 2025), reduced project delays, and improved staff retention (for example due to fair wages) (Thompson and Chapman 2006; Heery, Nash, and Hann 2023). Projects like the GDF programme illustrate the ultimate leverage: an annual investment in goodwill secures the operational flexibility and continuity required for multi-generational endeavours (NWS 2025). More locally, community relations maintained over time overcame potential objections when the need became acute.

Project professionals have a mandate to champion **early integration**, treating social value as a design priority that guides scope and asset creation from the earliest concept phase (RICS 2020). Our focus on **materiality** and **transparency** ensures that culturally sensitive solutions (working with communities rather than around them) genuinely reflect the needs of the community (Mulgan et al. 2019; UKGBC 2022; BSI 2023; Rafat 2024). We must utilise rigorous methodologies, such as SROI, to articulate this value in financial terms that resonate with executive decision-makers (SVUK 2016; Social Value Portal Ltd 2019). We can ensure that the right projects are prioritised, and then hold on to the commitment in the face of new and "shiny" projects competing for the same resources.

A project that contributes to a thriving community — improving health, generating skills, and fostering cohesion — is inherently de-risked and more profitable in the long term. This is the definition of sustainable success, proving that when communities thrive, our projects succeed. And at the same time, making projects far more rewarding for the project team.

AI usage in researching and writing this paper – statement by the author

This article, "Building Stronger Communities Through Projects: Social Value as a Strategic Driver of Organisational Success", was prepared with the assistance of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) large language model (LLM). Under direction and control of the author, the AI LLM was used to facilitate the drafting, research, and refinement process of the article. For example, AI was guided to refine the language to ensure it aligned with British English conventions, maintained a professional yet accessible tone, and avoided common AI-generated phrasing. An AI tool was also used to assist in the generation of illustrations. The author maintained full control at all times and assumes full responsibility for the completed work.

About the Author

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Dr. Hugo Minney is a Fellow of APM (Association for Project Management), a Member of PMI and PMI UK, Lead of APM's Benefits and Value IN (Interest Network) and Sustainability IN, founder of APM's Nuclear Industries IN and AI & Data Analytics IN, committee member of PMI UK's Sustainability Community of Action and Board Member of the Non-Profit PM4theWorld (none of which are paid). Minney is also chair of the British Standards Institute's working group on Benefits Management, which publishes and maintains BS 202002 (Applying benefits management on portfolios, programmes and projects) (also unpaid).

Minney is a business consultant. He has analysed the benefits of change, and weighed them up against the need for effective operations to keep the lights on, since 1990 when he started supplying high ticket computer systems and specialist software for workforce planning; he has built business cases of all types and is acutely aware of the pressures to make a single project a success at the expense of the organisation's objectives; as a board director in National Health Service he could take a portfolio overview and prioritise the individual benefits of projects to ensure the success of the whole organisation. Minney is now a project management consultant with a sideline chairing a charity restoring the sense of community for young people.

Minney specialises in putting a number on difficult benefits (such as sustainability and regeneration), motivating team members by reporting what they are achieving together and motivating teams to build the communities and companies we want to be part of – together. He believes in standards and is accredited as a Social Value practitioner and Chartered Project Professional.

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