



Building Back Better: West Midlands

Speakers

Anja Beriro,
Partner,
Browne Jacobson LLP
(Chair and Facilitator)

Terry Brewer,
Head of Public Sector Delivery,
The Social Value Portal

Amanda Lloyd,
Employment Manager,
Employment Access Team,
Birmingham City Council

Carly McGoldrick,
Assistant Director of Partnerships,
Catch 22

Isobel Woods,
Head of Enterprise,
City of Wolverhampton Council

Lewis Parker,
Director,
Kier Construction

In January 2023 the BSA, in collaboration with Browne Jacobson LLP, organised the latest regionally-focused seminar, which took place in Birmingham, on lessons from the lockdown period for achieving inclusive and sustainable growth in future.

The focus of the discussion was on the West Midlands. It involved several local government representatives from the region, as well as private and VCSE service and infrastructure project providers.

Anja Beriro opened by welcoming everyone and setting out the context for the discussion.

Isobel Woods was the first speaker, explaining how Wolverhampton Council had put inclusive and sustainable growth at the heart of its vision. A big driver was giving people options and choice; regeneration was seen as part of that.

The Wolverhampton Pound was central to its approach. This was based on the fact that significant anchor institutions in the city had a collective spend of over £830 million, which could be used to help achieve key objectives, with particular reference to opportunities for young people. Central to this was the lever of commissioning, to develop the local supply chain and secure local spend, land and property, employment, upskilling and career development. Collaboration was key: not dictating to the private sector, but leveraging opportunities to work as a team.

A new Sustainable Procurement Framework would embed sustainability and carbon reduction in supply chains. Contract management plans would ensure commitments were met.

Lewis Parker developed these themes from a private sector perspective. There was an opportunity to use construction to achieve wider sustainable growth, and work towards wellbeing, inclusivity and a sense of Place.

The challenges were significant: ongoing population growth; climate emergency; funding issues; and changes in lifestyles and expectations taking place since the pandemic. Lewis looked at ways these challenges could be met. He provided St Sidwells Point leisure centre as a case study of just what could be achieved: money had been saved; user numbers were forecast to have doubled; and the pool heating had never needed to be switched on since original commissioning. Early conversations were key to establishing priorities and working to achieve them.

Discussion involving all participants focused on lessons from the lockdown period, including for community leadership and for health and wellbeing indicators and their link to economic inactivity. Ability to access digital was often a constraint on ongoing community involvement and leadership. It was discussed that service co-location could be a spur to community engagement, as well as saving money.

There were also inquiries about the Wolverhampton Pound, which had developed over some years and needed a lot of mapping to assess each contract in order to increase supply chain awareness and engagement.

A participant asked about adoption of the Construction Playbook, which was useful where it was being adopted - for example on pipeline publication to encourage investment.

Finally there was discussion of the balance between social value specified in contracts and wider social responsibility and practice, which could be used in the pre-tender 'evidence' part of a bid. Contract-related social value could be time limited; planning may provide a route for embedding it longer term.

The second session then provided further focus on the theme of partnership working between sectors.

Terry Brewer opened this discussion. He outlined the scale of the Social Value Portal's activities, including on contract management and reporting, increased private sector involvement with a view to demonstrating ethical activity for investors, and the thinking behind the widely-used TOMS framework. The framework linked themes - jobs, growth, social, environmental and innovation - with outcomes, specific measures, and units, to produce a total social value to allow benchmarking and comparability. The framework was ever-evolving, with annual reviews and updates based on data and market needs.

Terry focused on the importance of a Place-based approach. He outlined four stages: listening and learning; building a delivery strategy; delivering and reporting; and sharing, learning and improving. Terry's case study was the 'County Durham Pound', under which, operating as a collective, partners set out to ensure that their buying and employing power and social value contributions benefited their people and communities.

Amanda Lloyd outlined the progress Birmingham was making towards the goal of inclusive growth, with particular reference to youth employment in light of the pockets of deprivation; these resulted from variations in both job availability and people's ability to access the jobs available. Amanda set out details of tools at the Council's disposal, under the headings of employer engagement, contractual / planning agreements, delivery partnerships and monitoring and performance.

Amanda set out specific case studies of partnerships which had delivered substantial results in terms of young people into - and retained in - work. The Commonwealth Games had provided several such opportunities, and there was an ongoing pipeline of projects looking to make a real difference for the next generation. Pilot schemes under the TOMS framework were underway, and planning protocols were also being reviewed, to align the 'social value ask' across services, linked to the limiting factors to inclusive growth.

The final speaker was Carly McGoldrick, who spoke from a VCSE perspective. Carly focused on Catch 22's work making business sectors more accessible for people with social barriers, as well as its employability programmes across the public and private sectors. Catch 22 delivered over a hundred public services, including across the West Midlands, and looked to build resilience and aspiration in communities.

To support people furthest from the labour market, it was important to focus on barriers such as housing insecurity and experience of the care or justice systems. Catch 22's work building employability programmes sought to do so. Partnerships across the private, public and VCSE sectors were key, as demonstrated by the Social Switch Project, initially funded by Google and later taken on by the GLA VRU after they saw the impact. Central to achieving innovation, impact and agility was sharing information; practicing inclusivity; building readiness; and being bold - especially during times of economic uncertainty when gaps tended to widen.

There was then a discussion involving all participants, focused in particular on ensuring long-term outcomes for communities, including developing the earlier theme of the importance both of contract-linked social value and of wider and often longer-term social responsibility.

It was asked how authorities could encourage employers to look at broader (and sometimes longer term) TOMS, beyond employment and skills. Multipliers could be used in contracts for other aspects if they were priorities. It was also important to consider authorities' own corporate behaviour when considering social outcomes, for example in staff recruitment.

There was discussion of a balance being struck between direct procurement with SMEs, and involving SMEs in equitable supply chains to leave a long-term legacy. Collaboration was key, with authorities acting as conveners in a region.

Publication of long-term pipelines with sufficient notice to plan ahead was another way to encourage long-term investment in communities.

There was also discussion of the role of professional services firms in delivering social value. Long-term projects and sustainable solutions were again key, which led to debate on the role of suppliers in general in working together to support communities long-term.

This was the fourth regional BSA discussion on Building Back Better, following similar seminars for the North West, North East and Yorkshire. The next seminar, in London in Spring, would focus specifically on social value and would build on this discussion.