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Social Value and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Through Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement in the UK Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) Sector

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ABSTRACT

Social value, a core element of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), is increasingly recognised as essential for promoting fairness, equality, well-being, and community engagement in sustainable industry practices. Despite its significance, the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) sector continues to face challenges in embedding social value effectively into project delivery. These challenges are intensified by a lack of clear theoretical grounding on what social value entails, resulting in fragmented interpretations and inconsistent implementation across AEC professionals. As a result, social value initiatives often struggle to move beyond vague commitments, while disengaged and vulnerable groups are often excluded from decision-making processes. This study draws on insights from three deliberative focus groups involving 20 industry experts in the UK, exploring barriers to achieving meaningful social value outcomes in the AEC sector. Findings reveal that social value definitions and assessment methods remain vague and inconsistent, while the value of community knowledge is frequently underestimated. Critically, early-stage project engagement with disengaged groups is often deprioritized due to resource constraints, limiting opportunities for inclusive participation. To address these challenges, the study proposes targeted strategies to overcome power imbalances in stakeholder engagement. These include developing tailored engagement approaches to involve traditionally disengaged groups, alongside the creation of place-based case studies that exemplify best practices in achieving equitable social value outcomes. By prioritizing inclusive engagement throughout the project lifecycle, the AEC sector can better align social value delivery with sustainable development goals and improve outcomes for marginalized communities.

1 | Introduction

The Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) sector plays a pivotal role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the demand for collaboration, sustainability, and societal impact continues to grow. This shift calls for the adoption of net-zero strategies, climate resilience, circular economy practices, and more effective stakeholder management to create social value and drive digital innovation. As the industry embraces these changes, there is an increasing emphasis on fostering inclusivity and aligning projects with local needs and aspirations through active community engagement (Loosemore et al. 2021; Loosemore et al. 2022).

The integration of SDGs into the AEC sector is crucial for promoting social sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). By aligning with SDGs, the sector can address pressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality,

and environmental sustainability (United Nations 2015). Incorporating social value in project delivery ensures long-term, equitable benefits for communities, making projects more inclusive. Strong CSR strategies are essential for achieving these objectives and advancing the broader goals of sustainability and societal impact in the AEC sector (Loosemore et al. 2021; Loosemore et al. 2022).

Built environment projects, due to their long lifecycles and broad societal objectives, are uniquely positioned to address complex challenges such as climate change, urbanisation, biodiversity loss, social inequalities, and mobility (Çıdık et al. 2024). In response, new legislation and conceptual frameworks have emerged, aiming to integrate social sustainability into the delivery of net-zero and climate-resilient projects (Behar and Sykes 2022; Chan et al. 2022; Çıdık 2023). However, despite the increasing recognition of social value in project management literature (Pinto et al. 2022), cost and time remain dominant quantitative measures of project success in the AEC sector (Green and Dikmen 2022). This empirical focus, reinforced by key institutions such as the Project Management Institute, often overlooks the broader societal benefits that projects can yield, including CSR outcomes (Green and Dikmen 2022).

Many social benefits of AEC projects, such as reducing inequalities and improving community well-being and social equity, are difficult to quantify. Their perceived importance varies across stakeholders, reinforcing the argument that project value is a socially constructed concept shaped through discourse and negotiation rather than objective calculation (Green and Sergeeva 2019). Instead of viewing value as either objective or subjective, it should be understood as an evolving narrative that influences decision-making (Green and Sergeeva 2019). CSR plays a key role in this narrative, as it emphasizes the importance of long-term societal impacts and community engagement in project delivery. Industry professionals must navigate these diverse stakeholder narratives, balancing costs and compromises that challenge traditional metrics of project success (Greiman 2013; Li et al. 2024).

However, the concept of social value due to its intangible nature remains ambiguously defined and inconsistently assessed, presenting significant challenges to its integration in AEC projects (Design Council 2025; Raiden and King 2022). Yet, without clear frameworks, industry professionals struggle to measure and prioritize these elements throughout project delivery (Lloyd-Walker and Walker 2015). This lack of clarity frequently results in the demotion of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles, as more tangible and immediate project goals take precedence (Denny-Smith et al. 2019; Dwivedi et al. 2025; Williams 2020).

Additionally, a lack of interdisciplinary collaboration and leadership within the UK AEC industry further exacerbates these challenges (Dwivedi et al. 2025; Georgiadou 2019). Existing social value frameworks often fail to meaningfully incorporate community perspectives or address power imbalances in stakeholder engagement, resulting in limited opportunities for inclusive decision-making (Shaukat et al. 2022; van Dijk 2024). Consequently, these frameworks frequently fall short in delivering meaningful and equitable social value outcomes (Gyadu-Asiedu et al. 2024).

Drawing on an overview of social value practices in the UK AEC sector, this study highlights significant inconsistencies in the implementation of social value strategies, particularly regarding inclusive engagement and the integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles. These gaps are especially evident when engaging disengaged or vulnerable groups. When such communities are excluded from decision-making processes, their insights and lived experiences are undervalued, reinforcing existing power imbalances and limiting opportunities for participatory design (Georgiadou and Loggia 2024). Addressing these issues requires targeted strategies that prioritize inclusive engagement and ensure social value frameworks are both equitable and impactful.

This paper aims to examine how social value can be effectively enhanced in stakeholder engagement processes within the AEC sector, with a particular focus on promoting EDI. The research objectives are to:

- Investigate the challenges and opportunities faced by built environment professionals in incorporating social value, digital innovation, and EDI principles into design decision-making and project delivery processes.
- Evaluate the UK AEC industry's readiness for inclusive community engagement, particularly in relation to engaging disengaged and vulnerable groups.
- Examine the methods used by industry professionals to integrate diverse community perspectives throughout the project lifecycle, particularly the role of digital innovation in developing more inclusive frameworks that address power imbalances in stakeholder engagement.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a comprehensive literature review on inclusive stakeholder engagement practices, barriers to social value integration, the role of EDI in construction, and current methods used to assess social value in the early stages of project delivery. Section 3 outlines the research design, employing qualitative methods, including focus group discussions with industry professionals. Section 4 presents the findings and discusses their implications. The final section concludes with theoretical and practical recommendations, as well as directions for future research.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Social Value in the AEC Industry

In recent years, global sustainability practices have highlighted the critical importance of social impact across various sectors. The intersection of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors in corporate strategy has gained considerable attention, particularly in the context of CSR (Ghazwani 2025). The integration of social value with stakeholder engagement and EDI within the AEC sectors reflects a broader CSR trend focused on creating inclusive and sustainable communities (Menghwar and Daood 2021). Scholars argue that while the relationship between stakeholder engagement and EDI in the AEC industry is well documented, their combined effect on social value requires deeper exploration. As CSR increasingly shapes

the competitiveness of organisations (He et al. 2024), it becomes essential to investigate how these elements jointly foster innovation and social responsibility specifically in the AEC sector.

The growing recognition of social outcomes in AEC projects is largely driven by global frameworks such as the United Nations SDGs and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting (Raiden and King 2022). Increasingly, investors and local authorities are seeking reliable ways to measure social performance, leading to the development of standardized assessment methodologies (SMF 2022). One widely recognized tool for evaluating the social impact of projects is the Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodology, which quantifies social, environmental, health, and well-being impacts in monetary terms (APM 2016; Banke-Thomas et al. 2015; Damtoft et al. 2023). SROI can be applied retrospectively to assess completed projects or prospectively to forecast social value using predictive indicators and metrics (Fujiwara et al. 2022).

Despite advancements in methodology, the integration of social value in the AEC industry remains inconsistent due to a lack of clear definitions and universally accepted metrics (Samuel and Watson 2023; Samuel et al. 2020). Quantifying social value is particularly challenging as it often involves intangible factors, requiring a careful balance between qualitative and quantitative measures (Fitton and Moncaster 2022). In response, recent research has underscored the need for spatially specific social value mapping, particularly in housing design, to enhance well-being outcomes (Samuel and Watson 2023). Moreover, community-led participatory approaches have proven more effective in capturing and visualising social value compared to traditional top-down methodologies (Piccoli et al. 2023; Samuel and Watson 2023).

A further challenge in assessing social value is the insufficient inclusion of diverse community perspectives. Prioritizing EDI principles in social value assessments can foster more inclusive environments and ensure that disengaged groups are actively involved in planning and decision-making (Im and Chung 2023). Research highlights the importance of integrating participatory data collection methods, such as focus groups and community workshops, to complement passive data sources like census data. This approach allows for the co-creation of knowledge, incorporating lived experiences and community-specific behaviors into the assessment process (Piccoli et al. 2023). As Chan and Oppong (2017) argue, local communities often hold deeper insights into social value impacts than project teams, making inclusive engagement essential for accurately measuring social outcomes.

In the United Kingdom, the Social Value Act (UK Government 2012) requires public procurement processes to consider social value in AEC projects, defining it as the net impact of an organisation on societal well-being (UK Government 2020). To create consistency in social value reporting, local authorities have increasingly adopted the National Themes, Outcomes, and Measures (TOMs) framework, which integrates SROI principles to assess and compare social value performance (Samuel et al. 2020). In addition, current policy priorities focus on areas such as economic inequality, climate change mitigation, equal opportunities, and health and well-being (UK Government 2020). These priorities are reflected in key social value strategies such as promoting local employment and skills development to boost community economic growth, strengthening engagement initiatives to build trust and incorporate public feedback, encouraging low-carbon design to reduce environmental impact, and advancing responsible procurement to enhance supply chain sustainability and fair labor practices.

Despite these initiatives, the full integration of social value in the AEC sector remains limited (Gyadu-Asiedu et al. 2024). One of the main challenges is the inconsistency in defining and measuring social value, making it difficult to establish standard benchmarks (Fitton and Moncaster 2022; Menghwar and Daood 2021; Samuel and Watson 2023). The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Social Value Toolkit for Architecture aims to address these challenges by promoting spatially specific social value mapping and demonstrating the role of design in enhancing well-being (Samuel et al. 2020). Additionally, innovative participatory methods, such as community workshops, have played a crucial role in capturing nuanced social value indicators that traditional data collection methods often overlook (Samuel and Watson 2023).

2.2 | Stakeholder Engagement in AEC Projects

Stakeholder engagement is a fundamental component of effective project delivery, particularly in construction, where a diverse range of actors must collaborate. These stakeholders include legal authorities, regional development agencies, government departments, financial institutions, designers, project managers, subcontractors, suppliers, service providers, facilities managers, owners, end-users, advocacy groups, third-sector organisations, and the media (Chinyio and Olomolaiye 2009). Throughout different project phases, these actors interact in complex ways, often holding conflicting interests (Mok et al. 2015). Pinto et al. (2022) emphasize that shared value among stakeholders is a key determinant of project success, alongside factors such as adherence to project plans, alignment with business objectives, and environmental sustainability.

Effective stakeholder engagement relies on clear communication, negotiation, and engagement strategies to build collaborative relationships, manage expectations, and address potential conflicts (Atkin and Skitmore 2008). The benefits of well-implemented stakeholder engagement are widely recognized in project management literature, with several key advantages highlighted.

First, integrating diverse perspectives throughout the project lifecycle supports informed decision-making by fostering more inclusive and well-rounded outcomes (Dwivedi and Dwivedi 2021; Loosemore et al. 2021, 2022). By actively involving stakeholders from the outset, project teams can better understand varying priorities and concerns, ultimately enhancing the quality of decisions made. Second, effective stakeholder engagement plays a crucial role in risk reduction. Early identification of stakeholder concerns allows for proactive mitigation strategies, helping to minimize potential risks that could disrupt project delivery (Georgiadou 2019). Thirdly, fostering collaboration and

encouraging shared ownership among stakeholders can significantly improve project success. Engaged stakeholders are more likely to support project objectives, contributing to the achievement of budget, schedule, and quality targets (Chinyio and Akintoye 2008). Finally, meaningful engagement helps to build trust within communities, enhancing public perception and increasing support for AEC projects. By involving community members in decision-making processes and demonstrating a commitment to their concerns, project teams can improve relationships and strengthen public acceptance (Loosemore et al. 2021, 2022).

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) asserts that individuals affected by projects should have the right to participate in decision-making, thereby enhancing project sustainability (IAP2 2024). However, stakeholder engagement extends beyond mere communication; it requires active involvement, collaboration, and the fostering of mutual understanding and respect. While it is often framed as a CSR initiative, there is a need to move beyond a compliance-based approach to one that genuinely creates value and navigates conflicts in an ethical manner (Camilleri 2017; Klein et al. 2019). Despite its theoretical advantages, stakeholder engagement in practice is frequently reduced to a procedural obligation. Public consultations, a common mechanism for engagement, are often perceived as box-ticking exercises rather than genuine efforts to involve stakeholders. This reflects broader criticisms that concepts such as 'social licence' are sometimes deployed as strategies to neutralise opposition rather than as meaningful commitments to community participation and long-term social value creation (Boutilier 2015).

Several challenges hinder the successful implementation of inclusive, user-focused stakeholder engagement. Aaltonen et al. (2021) identify key barriers, including conflicting stakeholder interests, time constraints, and difficulties in balancing user needs with broader project objectives. Similarly, Georgiadou and Loggia (2024) highlight structural challenges, such as power imbalances, lack of trust, and resistance to change, which can obstruct engagement efforts. Inadequate communication, the absence of clear engagement strategies, and difficulties in managing diverse stakeholder expectations can further limit the effectiveness of these initiatives, rendering them superficial and compliance-driven rather than substantive (Aaltonen et al. 2021; Bond-Barnard et al. 2018).

A further challenge lies in industry-wide resistance to engagement, stemming from misconceptions about its benefits. Kaur and Lodhia (2019) and Giardullo (2023) suggest that many stakeholders perceive engagement as time-consuming and financially burdensome, leading to a reluctance to participate. This resistance is heightened by a lack of expertise in participatory processes, with professionals often reluctant to invest in exploratory learning opportunities such as pilot projects or best practice knowledge-sharing initiatives (Solli-Sæther et al. 2015). Without the necessary skills and incentives, stakeholder engagement efforts risk becoming ad hoc and superficial, ultimately reinforcing existing power imbalances rather than addressing them.

Another major issue is the lack of industry engagement with diverse community groups in social value assessments. To improve inclusivity, policy recommendations advocate for embedding EDI principles by implementing (Im and Chung 2023; Piccoli et al. 2023):

- Culturally appropriate communication strategies, such as translated materials, diverse language options, and accessible formats.
- Accessibility measures for people with disabilities, including accessible venues, Braille materials, audio recordings, and sign language interpretation.
- Targeted outreach efforts, partnerships with local organisations, and active engagement with traditionally underrepresented groups.

In practice, integrating participatory workshops, focus groups, and community consultations into stakeholder engagement processes enhances both the accuracy and credibility of social value assessments (CIOB 2022). These methods work alongside traditional data collection approaches by embedding community needs assessments as a fundamental step, ensuring that social value considerations reflect lived experiences rather than relying solely on top-down data sources (Piccoli et al. 2023).

2.3 | The Growing Role of Digital Tools for Stakeholder Engagement

Digitalisation driven by Industry 4.0 is transforming AEC project delivery, significantly influencing stakeholder engagement practices. As digital tools become more integrated, engagement is shifting from traditional, linear methods to dynamic, data-driven processes that enhance collaboration and decision-making, thus improving project outcomes and social value within built environment projects (Khan et al. 2024). Technologies such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and online social value platforms are enabling more inclusive, transparent, and efficient project development processes. These tools not only foster better communication and collaboration but also provide new ways to capture and integrate social value considerations, including community feedback, health, and environmental outcomes.

BIM improves stakeholder collaboration, data sharing, and communication throughout the project lifecycle. By creating a coordinated digital representation of the project, stakeholders can access real-time data, identify potential clashes, and make informed decisions. This reduces costly retrofit work and contributes to social value by improving project efficiency, reducing operational costs, and enhancing environmental and health outcomes (Georgiadou 2019). The integration of participatory Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technologies into BIM can further embed social value into climate-resilient AEC projects (Georgiadou and Loggia 2024).

In terms of community engagement, BIM enables more inclusive consultations by offering stakeholders, especially local communities, a clearer understanding of design proposals. The use of 3D visualisations and interactive models empowers non-technical audiences to engage in the process, providing valuable feedback on design decisions (Khan et al. 2014). Additionally,

BIM supports real-time collaboration between developers, local authorities, and the community, ensuring that all parties can actively contribute to shaping the project. By incorporating feedback directly into the project model, BIM helps avoid potential conflicts and ensures the design is more socially acceptable (Kassem et al. 2015). This participatory approach leads to improved social value by ensuring the project better aligns with local needs, promotes inclusivity, and enhances community wellbeing (Lindblad and Guerrero 2020).

Advancements in VR and AR technologies have expanded their role in inclusive stakeholder engagement by offering even more immersive and interactive experiences. These technologies now allow for real-time alterations to designs based on community feedback, enhancing responsiveness to stakeholder needs. By facilitating deeper engagement, AR and VR help ensure that disengaged or nontechnical groups, often overlooked in traditional consultation methods, can actively participate. This contributes to social value by ensuring that design better reflects the diverse needs of the community, promoting equity, accessibility, and ultimately sustainability in the AEC sector (Kassem et al. 2015; Khan et al. 2014; Lehtinen and Aaltonen 2024; Lindblad and Guerrero 2020).

Social media platforms and project websites enable real-time, two-way communication with stakeholders, facilitating both project updates and community outreach (Lehtinen and Aaltonen 2024; Lehtinen et al. 2018). These platforms also provide online forums for ongoing feedback and discussions, making it easier to involve stakeholders who may be excluded from traditional consultation methods. Furthermore, mobile technologies have significantly advanced the ability to capture and spatially map social data, which can inform land valuation and strategic planning (Samuel et al. 2020; Samuel and Watson 2023). Tools such as the RIBA Social Value Portal enable designers to demonstrate the social impact of housing designs on people and communities. This platform allows for clear and measurable evidence of social value, enhancing the transparency of design decisions. Additionally, other tools like the UK Social Value Bank and Social Value Insight provide valuable resources for evidencing social value in areas such as Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting, public procurement, and community investment services (HACT 2024; UK Government 2020).

While technology offers various tools for enhancing stakeholder engagement in the AEC field, it presents several limitations, particularly in fostering EDI. Williams (2020) advocates for inclusive collaboration in data-driven projects to ensure ethical practices, transparency, and equality outcomes. Lehtinen et al. (2018) highlight the importance of in-person dialogues with local communities to ensure meaningful discussions and co-creation of social value. In addition, the technical expertise required for effective digital engagement may be lacking among specific types of stakeholders, leading to potential delays and ambiguities in decision-making (Toukola and Ahola 2022). Digital engagement cannot be the sole method for involving stakeholders for various reasons. First, a key limitation is the digital divide, where individuals without access to technology or digital literacy are excluded from engagement, resulting in a lack of diverse perspectives (Mulholland et al. 2025). Second, misinformation can spread quickly through digital platforms, complicating efforts to maintain trust and credibility, thus undermining the quality of community engagement and the understanding of local needs (IAP2 2024). Thirdly, the implementation of digital solutions requires effective coordination and interoperability, which are often challenging and can reduce the effectiveness of engagement processes (Steen 2022; Williams 2020).

Despite increased interest in inclusive frameworks, academic research on integrating diverse stakeholder viewpoints into AEC practices remains underdeveloped, limiting the social value potential of a project (Gyadu-Asiedu et al. 2024). These challenges necessitate a balanced approach that incorporates both digital and traditional methods for more inclusive and effective stakeholder engagement.

2.4 | EDI as Tool for Driving Stakeholder Engagement and Social Value

Bridging the gap between academic research and policy implementation is crucial for developing a more rigorous and inclusive approach to social value in the construction and AEC sector (Green and Dikmen 2022). While academic studies have refined methodologies for assessing social impact (Pinto et al. 2022), a significant gap remains in the literature regarding the integration of EDI principles into social value frameworks. EDI principles are often associated with workforce practices and operations, rather than stakeholder engagement or ethical design decisions for enhancing social value (Steen 2022) This presents an opportunity (and a current gap) to expand the application of EDI principles to enhance social value outcomes more effectively.

Existing frameworks often fail to effectively capture the diverse experiences and needs of communities, as they typically prioritize economic and operational metrics over social equity. This lack of consistency in embedding EDI in both theory and practice limits the potential of these frameworks to promote truly inclusive social value assessments. Strengthening the connection between research and practice, particularly through participatory, community-led approaches, can ensure that EDI principles are not merely incorporated but central to the development of more contextually relevant and equitable social value assessments (Green and Dikmen 2022). While progress has been made, the focus now must be on addressing this gap by integrating EDI more thoroughly into the design and implementation of construction projects to better reflect the diverse and holistic needs of communities (Pinto et al. 2022).

Loosemore et al. (2021) and Loosemore et al. (2022) argue that the absence of inclusive reporting frameworks in the construction sector leads to gaps in engagement and decision-making, particularly regarding equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). One of the most significant barriers to meaningful engagement is the lack of inclusive governance frameworks and policies that account for the diverse needs, interests, and power dynamics of stakeholders (Dwivedi et al. 2025). At a global level, existing policies and legislation rarely mandate stakeholder collaboration, leaving engagement largely discretionary (Ganeshu et al. 2023). Even where stakeholders express a willingness to collaborate, the absence of legal clarity in defining responsibilities and duties

complicates the implementation of comprehensive engagement strategies. This lack of formal accountability often results in weaker and less inclusive engagement with local communities and project beneficiaries (Chu et al. 2022; Malalgoda et al. 2013).

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Research Design

The study investigates the multiple, intersecting phenomena of social value, stakeholder engagement, inclusion, and digital tools as experienced in the UK AEC sector. The research adopts a phenomenographic approach to capture the diverging and converging experiences and expectations of participants (Åkerlind 2025). Rather than seeking data saturation or a statistically representative sample, participants are purposefully selected to explore the current state of these phenomena, substantiate the field in relation to theory, and set the stage for future research (Collier-Reed et al. 2009; Trigwell 2006). Phenomenography assumes that reality is experienced subjectively and interpreted through individual perspectives. By focusing on how social value is derived through stakeholder engagement in practice, phenomenography is particularly suited to allow for a nuanced exploration of diverse perceptions without predetermining what social value is. This depth-focused method is especially valuable for investigating complex, contextual experiences in the AEC sector.

The authors conducted a thematic literature review on UK and international debates to address gaps in understanding social value, stakeholder engagement, and EDI within the AEC sector. This review aimed to generate insights that could influence industry policy and practice, particularly regarding social sustainability implications for professionals and policymakers following the 2012 UK Social Value Act. Key challenges identified included power imbalances, inconsistent frameworks, and a lack of governance structures, which informed the design of subsequent empirical research.

To explore these themes further, three multi-stakeholder focus groups were conducted between March and June 2024. The first two sessions took place in person in London and Manchester in March, while the third session, held in June, adopted a hybrid format combining in-person participation in London with online contributions. Each session lasted 120 min and was facilitated by two experienced moderators. The sessions aimed to elicit insights on inclusive stakeholder engagement in the built environment, focusing on best practices, barriers, and potential policy and industry improvements. A semi-structured format was employed, incorporating open-ended questions and guided, timed discussion prompts. Facilitators utilized a modified version of the nominal group technique (NGT) (McMillan et al. 2014) to ensure balanced participation and mitigate dominance by more vocal individuals, a common challenge in stakeholder engagement research. Icebreaker activities encouraged initial contributions, ensuring all participants had an opportunity to speak before progressing to structured deliberation.

The focus groups comprised 20 participants from national and international organizations across key sectors, including design, development, construction, asset management, audit, assurance, and tax services, social value, net zero, and climate resilience, and environmental economics. Additionally, 10 participants represented UK higher education institutions, government agencies, and local authorities, contributing a regulatory and policy-focused perspective. Table 1 provides an overview of participant identifiers, sector affiliations, and workshop participation.

Phenomenographic studies often rely on targeted data collection to explore variations in participants' perceptions. Kullberg and Ingerman (2022) emphasise that smaller data sets can effectively uncover key patterns in experience when carefully selected and aligned with research aims. In this study, the three focus groups followed this targeted approach, utilising a manageable yet meaningful data set to capture in-depth and diverse social value perceptions in the AEC sector. Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with expertise in social value and stakeholder engagement (Bryman 2012; Hammersley 2013). Selection criteria included professional networks, publication track records, and direct invitations to ensure diversity in roles and industry perspectives. Facilitators maintained a neutral stance throughout to minimise bias and limited interaction outside structured discussion prompts (Mills et al. 2006).

Participants received a briefing document in advance, outlining key themes, discussion objectives, and an overview of relevant literature. Data collection methods included workshop audio recordings, detailed observational notes, and participant-generated written reflections. This multi-modal approach enhanced data reliability and supported a comprehensive understanding of the discussions (Flick 2018).

Existing CSR and sustainability research highlights the suitability of smaller data sets for exploring complex social dynamics. For example, Opferkuch et al. (2021) employed 43 interviews followed by a focus group of eight participants to investigate corporate circular economy disclosure. Similarly, Fobbe et al. (2024) explored stakeholder engagement in CSR through three case studies involving 20 interviews and supplementary secondary data. Lane and Devin (2018) adopted a process-oriented approach by reviewing nine CSR reports from three industries, while Stocker et al. (2020) used content analysis of 119 sustainability reports to classify stakeholder engagement models. These examples illustrate that impactful CSR research can adopt varied methodological approaches, including smaller yet targeted participant groups, provided the study design is well-justified and aligned with research objectives.

Selection criteria included professional networks, publication track records, and direct invitations, ensuring diversity in roles and industry perspectives. To minimize bias, facilitators maintained a neutral stance and limited interaction outside of structured discussion prompts (Mills et al. 2006). Participants received a briefing document in advance, outlining key themes, discussion objectives, and an overview of relevant literature. Data collection methods included workshop audio recordings, detailed observational notes, and participant-generated written reflections. This multi-modal approach enhanced data reliability and facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the discussions (Flick 2018).

TABLE 1 | Participant information.

Identifier	Sector	Affiliation	London, March 2024	Manchester, March 2024	Hybrid, June 2024
P1	Academia	Lecturer in Construction Project Management	√	√	√
P2	Academia	Research Associate	√		√
P3	Global design, engineering and consultancy organisation	Associate Director Social Value and Sustainability	√		
P4	Environmental Economics consultancy	Director	√		
P5	Sustainability consultancy	Global Sustainability Manager	√		√
P6	Environmental regulator	Senior Advisor	√		
P7	Sustainability, local authority	Climate Change and Sustainability Project Officer	√		√
P8	Sustainability, local authority	Climate Change and Sustainability Project Officer	√		√
P9	Business consulting and services	Senior Associate Director, Water and Environment	√		
P10	Project management consultancy	Director		√	√
P11	Architecture	Associate Director		√	√
P12	Global consultancy	Director		√	r
P13	Local authority	Project Manager		√	√
P14	Social value consultancy	Director		√	√
P15	Global design, engineering and consultancy organisation	Stakeholder engagement consultant		√	√
P16	Local authority	Spatial Planning Officer		√	√
P17	Academia	Senior Lecturer in Construction	√		
P18	Academia	Senior Lecturer in Planning			√
P19	Planning consultancy	Director			√
P20	Academia	Lecturer in project management			√

3.2 | Data Analysis

Focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data representation. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019), an iterative approach for identifying patterns and emergent themes. Thematic coding facilitated the examination of key themes related to:

- responsible stakeholder engagement in AEC projects,
- robust data management for delivering social value, and
- the interrelationship between digital transitions in stakeholder engagement and social value.

To enhance analytical rigor, both inductive and deductive coding were applied; inductive coding allowed themes to emerge from the data, while deductive coding ensured alignment with existing theoretical frameworks (Nowell et al. 2022). Researcher triangulation was also employed, with multiple analysts independently coding transcripts before collaboratively refining findings to mitigate individual bias.

4 | Results

4.1 | Responsible Stakeholder Engagement in AEC Projects

A key observation from participants was the significant variation in UK construction projects, each with distinct core objectives. A common challenge highlighted was the concept of the "social value fog" (*P20*) which refers to the complexity and

difficulty in fully understanding social value. This complexity is shaped by various factors, including social performance, the local context, and differing behaviours within communities. Despite these challenges, participants identified several barriers to achieving inclusive stakeholder engagement, stressing the importance of addressing these issues from the outset of any project.

The most pressing barrier identified was the need to distribute power more equally and ensure stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes from the feasibility phase to throughout the project lifecycle. As one participant noted:

> "The key is to involve stakeholders from the start. Power should be shared equally, and communities must be at the heart of decision-making."
>
> (P7)

There was unanimous agreement among participants that early community engagement is essential for ensuring the long-term legacy of built environment projects. However, the critical question remains: How can continuity in engagement be maintained over time? One participant emphasized:

> "We need to make communities feel heard. We need to find methods for engagement that work for everyone. Creating inclusive and safe spaces to address social anxiety in participation is key, which will help us demonstrate the legacy of the project."
>
> (P11)

Participants also discussed the EDI principles in stakeholder engagement processes to ensure a more equitable distribution of power. The adoption of new stakeholder management techniques and tools was suggested to enhance early engagement and deliver meaningful outcomes. As one social value manager emphasized:

> "You need to do the groundwork before engaging, learn about the community, understand what they want to discuss, and identify the influence you can have on the project, particularly in terms of fostering zero-carbon literacy and understanding the long-term impact."
>
> (P5)

This highlights the need for professionals to move beyond relying solely on the most vocal stakeholders. To achieve this, it is essential to use clear, accessible language, visual aids, and face-to-face communication. Traditional, desk-based, top-down approaches risk introducing bias and may undermine the achievement of EDI objectives. One participant reflected on this issue:

> "We can't just rely on the loudest voices. It's essential to seek out those who are less engaged and create an environment where everyone feels safe to participate."
>
> (P14)

Participants shared best practices from their projects. For instance, in a case study from Wales, the project team was required to conduct all meetings in Welsh, necessitating the hiring of a translator, despite both the project team and stakeholders primarily speaking English. Similarly, in Ireland, a preference for local representatives with local accents over UK-based teams for engagement activities was noted, underscoring the significance of local identity and representation in fostering trust and effective engagement.

Finally, participants reported the skills gap to truly inclusive stakeholder engagement among practitioners (Steen 2022; Williams 2020). Environmental and cultural factors must also be recognized as either barriers or opportunities that influence engagement. A participant shared:

> "Professionals need to understand the community's values and cultural context to engage effectively. Without this understanding, we risk missing out on key perspectives."
>
> (P13)

By addressing these challenges, professionals can help ensure that all voices are heard and that the social value of projects is fully realized, creating lasting positive impacts for communities.

4.2 | Robust Data Management for Delivering Social Value

Findings from the focus group indicate that qualitative data is often regarded as secondary in the context of social value and stakeholder engagement. This is primarily due to the difficulty of integrating such data into conventional reporting tools and mechanisms, which are predominantly designed to accommodate quantitative metrics. As a result, qualitative data—particularly those concerning experiences, opinions, and motivations—is frequently overlooked or undervalued. Moreover, the research reveals a notable gap in the available tools for examining the interrelationships between qualitative and quantitative social value data.

Both qualitative and quantitative data are essential for providing a comprehensive understanding of social value. However, a central challenge identified in the focus group discussions is ensuring that quantitative data does not dominate the analysis. Instead, there is a clear need to adopt an approach that integrates both data types, utilizing their complementary strengths to enhance overall outputs. This dual approach would contribute to a more holistic and nuanced understanding of social value, better capturing the diverse and multifaceted impacts of stakeholder engagement.

A critical issue raised by participants was the need for more robust qualitative evaluations of social value, which are often overshadowed by a focus on quantitative metrics. One participant observed:

> "What is missing is the qualitative robustness of social value evaluations, and a better understanding of how to assess the intangible benefits to communities."
>
> (P14)

This highlights the ongoing challenge of assessing the long-term social impacts of construction projects in the United Kingdom, with a particular emphasis on the difficulties in capturing intangible social value. Evaluations often prioritize quantitative measures, such as building performance and project management, which may not fully reflect the project's social outcomes.

Furthermore, the financial benefits associated with social value are often not realized during the operational phase or in post-occupancy evaluations. This issue points to a deeper systemic problem—the undervaluation of stakeholder engagement in economic terms, which impedes the realization of social value. As one participant succinctly stated:

> "Clients and developers are often unwilling to invest in community engagement. They're reluctant to take on the reputational risk of early engagement, and when budgets are cut, stakeholder engagement and social value activities are the first to go."
>
> (P12)

Time and budget constraints were identified as significant barriers to effective community participation and stakeholder engagement, further complicating the integration of social value into project outcomes. Additionally, the influence of social power on design outcomes often leads to a prioritization of value for money over the creation of real, lasting value for the community. This dynamic is compounded by professionals' difficulties in measuring the intangible benefits of social value, making it challenging to apply frameworks such as SROI and ESG reporting effectively. As one participant explained:

> "We lack the expertise to effectively apply tools like SROI. It's a real challenge to measure the intangible impacts and shifts in community values over time."
>
> (P20)

In light of these challenges, it is clear that a more robust approach to data management is needed. By addressing both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of social value, professionals can better capture the full range of impacts that a project may have on communities. This requires not only improved data collection techniques but also enhanced skills in data interpretation and reporting. By fostering a more integrated and comprehensive approach to social value data, the built environment sector can more effectively demonstrate the long-term benefits of stakeholder engagement and create lasting, meaningful impacts for communities.

4.3 | The Interrelationship Between Digital Transitions in Stakeholder Engagement to Drive Social Value

The intersection between digital transitions and social value is crucial for supporting inclusive digital transformation within the UK construction industry. Focus group participants identified a reciprocal relationship where social value helps create better digital products, and digital tools enhance social value outcomes. However, a key challenge is the difficulty of replicating the humanistic aspects of stakeholder engagement through digital platforms. Effective engagement relies on principles such as early involvement, collaboration, and co-production, which are not universally implemented across construction projects. As one participant noted, "Until this is realised, the development of an online digital tool won't have the desired impact."

Digital tools can enhance communication but cannot replace the human-centred aspects of engagement, such as face-to-face dialogue. One participant expressed, "It is predominantly based on participants with no social anxiety who are willing to speak up. Some people would not accept the meetings being put into a digital environment" (*P11*). This highlights the risk of excluding certain voices, particularly those less comfortable with online participation.

Leadership plays a crucial role in navigating digital transformation, ensuring tools remain aligned with human needs. Trust emerged as a central issue in discussions on digitalisation, with participants noting that digital platforms can exacerbate scepticism. As one participant observed, "The lack of trust in an organisation (industry) could increase using digital tools. Trust is in perception and reputation, so to build trust we must have personal contact and we need to be careful with the level of digitalisation" (*P4*). This highlights the need for maintaining personal connections alongside digital tools to foster trust.

Focus group discussions revealed a misalignment between industry expectations for digital transformation and current expertise. Many individuals tasked with these changes lack formal training, learning through trial and error. One participant stated, "Try to work with fewer assumptions on where the other experts are at with their work, and be open to finding a meeting point" (*P3*). This underscores the need for clear distinctions between areas of expertise, such as data management, digital innovation, and social value, to facilitate effective interdisciplinary collaboration.

Despite the urgency of digitalisation, the rapid pace often leaves little room for reflection. As one participant observed, "This frantic energy but slow pace often doesn't leave much room to learn from where things don't go as planned" (*P9*). The lack of established frameworks contributes to the fragmented nature of progress in both digital transformation and social value work.

A key finding from the focus group was the interdependence between social value creation and digital tool development. For digital tools to enhance social value, social value principles must be embedded from the outset. One participant suggested, "Instead of trying to reach for the end goal first, we propose an acceptance of incremental change that builds on feedback loops, learning, and knowledge exchange that allow the final goal to be reached" (*P14*). This phased approach, emphasised in other sub-fields, requires time, resources, and a clear understanding of needs.

While digital tools can empower communities, they cannot ensure inclusive engagement on their own. Their effectiveness depends on access to devices, internet infrastructure, and digital literacy, which are often inaccessible to certain demographic

groups. One participant concluded, "Digital platforms alone cannot ensure inclusive stakeholder engagement or lead to the creation of social value" (*P18*). Thus, digital tools must be complemented by more accessible methods, particularly for underrepresented communities. The focus group also highlighted the lack of systems for sharing best practices in stakeholder engagement. The subjective nature of social value creation makes it difficult to identify concrete examples of successful practices. One participant pointed out the need for published case studies, stating, "We need to create pilot case studies that demonstrate the positive economic impacts of inclusive engagement, as well as the negative consequences of insufficient engagement" (*P14*). Such evidence would help justify investment in stakeholder engagement, demonstrating its tangible benefits for project delivery.

5 | Discussion

> "It is very difficult to get case studies of good stakeholder engagement."
>
> (P20)

The analysis of the focus group discussions highlights the critical need for real-world case studies and pilot projects to assess the socio-economic impact of early stakeholder engagement, particularly in relation to project budgets. One significant gap identified is the limited academic research on social value theoretical frameworks on which to develop further social value and inclusive stakeholder engagement practices in the UK AEC industry. This theory-practice gap exacerbates the challenge of determining the appropriate level of stakeholder engagement during the planning stages (Aaltonen et al. 2021; Design Counci 2025; Gyadu-Asiedu et al. 2024; Shaukat et al. 2022). The industry's focus on quantitative metrics in social value may overlook the intangible aspects of community impact, such as trust-building, social cohesion, and cultural enrichment. While measurable outcomes provide clarity, they often fail to capture the knowledge, experiences, behaviors, and skills of a local community. These less tangible benefits are equally important in assessing the full value of stakeholder engagement (Bond-Barnard et al. 2018; Menghwar and Daood 2021).

The focus groups also highlighted stakeholders' reluctance to engage early in the process, as many perceive their involvement will not lead to meaningful change. This aligns with Lehtinen and Aaltonen (2024), who noted that disengagement occurs when stakeholders feel their contributions will not impact project outcomes. The findings underscore the importance of a "warm-up phase" in engagement strategies to build trust and overcome initial resistance (Çıdık et al. 2024). Additionally, conducting a local community needs assessment is vital for grounding engagement efforts in tangible, measurable needs (Fitton and Moncaster 2022). Such assessments systematically identify and evaluate the specific needs, challenges, and priorities of a community, informing targeted interventions and resource allocation. Recording baseline data on key environmental factors, such as air quality, green spaces, and local design preferences, offers valuable insights into community priorities (Bond-Barnard et al. 2018). This approach aligns with literature advocating for data-driven engagement strategies that ensure project outcomes reflect local needs. Furthermore, it provides a framework for assessing the impact of interventions over time, enabling ongoing adjustments to engagement strategies (Chan et al. 2022; Williams 2020).

The focus group discussion also endorsed that any engagement efforts should prioritize groups that are typically disengaged or underrepresented. As one participant noted, it is essential to understand why certain individuals or communities do not engage and develop targeted strategies to encourage their involvement. Community groups or third sector organizations (charities, Non-Governmental Organisations) who already operate in the community often serve as gatekeepers. They can carry out the communication and engagement with underrepresented groups and can play a pivotal role in relationship building, particularly on large infrastructure and built environment projects, as supported by Georgiadou and Loggia (2024).

Finally, digital technologies and platforms play a crucial role in facilitating stakeholder engagement, enhancing transparency, and supporting the delivery of social value. However, the focus groups revealed that they should complement, rather than replace, the core principles of stakeholder engagement, which involve actively listening to communities and understanding their needs. The integration of social value into digital platforms highlights the broader implications of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the use of digital data for stakeholder engagement (Behar and Sykes 2022; Steen 2022). It is essential that these tools are developed and managed with an emphasis on equity to prevent reinforcing existing power imbalances (Loosemore et al. 2021; van Dijk 2024). As digital engagement tools continue to evolve, it is critical that they are designed with EDI principles at the forefront to ensure equitable participation for all stakeholders, regardless of their socio-economic status or background (Klein et al. 2019).

6 | Conclusions and Recommendations

This study investigated the three-pronged challenge of stakeholder engagement, social value creation, and digital innovation within the AEC construction industry in the United Kingdom. It is evident that achieving responsible and effective stakeholder engagement is complex, often characterised by the "social value fog"—a term that reflects the challenges of balancing social performance, local contexts, and community behaviours. Despite increasing awareness, a significant lack of academic foundation remains to guide their effective implementation. This absence of theoretical groundings hinders the development of comprehensive strategies that address the complexities inherent in stakeholder engagement practices. As such, this study highlights the urgent need to establish a robust academic framework that reconciles social value with stakeholder engagement and EDI approaches in the UK AEC industry.

The study shows that early and inclusive engagement, particularly with disengaged groups, is pivotal in fostering long-term positive outcomes. However, meaningful engagement is often hindered by power imbalances that marginalize underrepresented groups. These disparities restrict inclusive

decision-making and undermine community-driven outcomes. To address this, the study emphasizes the integration of EDI principles as a critical strategy for overcoming stakeholder engagement barriers related to language, culture, and socio-economic status. Collaborating with local community organizations is identified as a valuable approach to amplifying diverse voices from the early stages of project planning.

To improve stakeholder engagement practices in the built environment, the study offers several recommendations for AEC professionals:

- Developing a structured engagement framework: Incorporating a "warm-up phase" at the project's outset is crucial for building trust with disengaged communities, reducing resistance, and encouraging sustained involvement.
- Prioritizing inclusivity by addressing the barriers faced by underrepresented groups: Partnering with community organizations can help bridge gaps and ensure diverse perspectives are included from the beginning.
- Adopting a mixed-methods approach to data management to enhance the understanding of social value impacts: Combining qualitative insights with quantitative data ensures a more comprehensive assessment of project outcomes.
- Integrating digital tools to improve accessibility, transparency, and efficiency in engagement processes: Digital platforms should be designed to complement, rather than replace, face-to-face interactions to ensure that individuals less familiar with technology are not excluded.
- Maintaining ongoing engagement and monitoring: Embedding feedback mechanisms will enable continuous dialogue, allowing projects to adapt to evolving community needs and therefore sustain meaningful stakeholder engagement throughout the project lifecycle
- Investing in AEC skills training to enhance the effectiveness of engagement practices: Social value managers and AEC practitioners must be equipped with the qualifications to assess both qualitative and quantitative social impacts while navigating digital tools effectively.

Future research should focus on developing frameworks that align inclusive stakeholder engagement with social value strategies, providing practitioners with guidance to address the complexities of diverse community needs. Establishing a robust evidence base of case studies will be essential for testing and refining engagement strategies. These case studies should offer clear, actionable guidance that practitioners can adapt to suit diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts, ensuring strategies remain relevant and effective. Further investigation is also required to improve methods for measuring social value, ensuring both tangible and intangible impacts are captured across the project lifecycle. Efforts to optimize digital tools for enhanced inclusivity will also be critical, ensuring that no groups are inadvertently excluded.

Ultimately, social value and stakeholder engagement are vital in promoting collaboration across disciplines such as architecture, engineering, construction, urban planning, data science, and social policy. By integrating these fields, the AEC industry can develop inclusive and effective engagement strategies that align social value principles with the transition to net-zero and climate resilience. Social value must be treated as an ongoing process that fosters inclusivity, ensures responsiveness to diverse community needs, and drives sustainable outcomes in the built environment. As a "boundary object," social value can unite stakeholders, bridge differences, and inspire collective action toward shared sustainability goals. The study calls on policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to adopt holistic, inclusive approaches that actively involve marginalized groups, ensuring that the built environment evolves in ways that are fair, resilient, and socially just.

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