

Summary and recommendations

Community engagement and social value are increasingly acknowledged as vital components of a sustainable and inclusive rail industry, yet they remain under-prioritised and inconsistently embedded across the sector.

This resource argues that for community engagement and social value to gain the recognition they deserve, there must be a shift from relying on individual passion to institutional commitment, driven by policy and legislation.

“GBR has a big focus on communities, but there needs to be clear instructions – you NEED to do this.”

“We need to stop saying this is a nice thing to do as part of a sustainability strategy, and instead say it’s a must. It’s not a cause; it can be a real solution.”

“Community engagement and social value still don’t have a high enough profile within the industry, it’s still seen as an add-on, and a ‘nice to have.’ People don’t understand that the approach to sustainability, including social sustainability, should underpin everything the industry is doing.”

“There is a feeling that the industry wants to move forward in this space, but something is needed to inject some pace and overcome the blockers. Someone needs to take accountability in driving community engagement and social value.”

Currently, community engagement and social value are often seen as optional or ‘nice to have’ rather than essential. This perception seems related to historical directives set by government. However, with rail reform underway, community-orientated priorities for GBR, and wider change being spurred by the Social Value Model, there is clear scope and appetite for making clear that community engagement is paramount.

The rail industry is still perceived by many crucial external partners – such as local authorities – as process-heavy and bureaucratic, which slows progress and stifles innovation in social sustainability. Unlike environmental sustainability, which benefits from established standards and reporting metrics, social value lacks consistent frameworks and accountability. This imbalance means that while environmental efforts are embedded, social initiatives often fall by the wayside due to fragmentation, unclear policies and a lack of clear leadership. Without formal expectations, there is the risk that many professionals, already stretched by technical, operational and commercial demands, may deprioritise community engagement and social value.



Summary and recommendations

This resource emphasises the need for champions within the industry to advocate for community engagement and social value, and for decision-makers, such as DfT and GBR, to ensure that those with relevant knowledge and experience, such as Social Sustainability Working Group members, be actively involved in shaping policy. Harnessing their insights and expertise to inform conversations in these areas will only increase the already huge potential for meaningful progress that rail reform offers. Consultation with those already working in the field is essential to ensure that reforms are grounded in practical experience and community needs.

We must attempt to guard against the risk of particular elements of rail reform being rushed, leaving community engagement and social value behind. To counter this, the industry needs a unified directive – a ‘clear true voice’ – that mandates and guides social value integration. Examples from other sectors, like construction, show that maturity in social sustainability is achievable with the right support and scrutiny.

We must also seek to ensure that GBR’s view of social value is not too narrow, focused mainly on areas such as inclusive hiring and procurement. A broader understanding is needed, one that recognises the railway’s transformational role in delivering societal benefits such as connectivity, economic development and social mobility. Tools like the RSVT aim to support this shift by helping organisations measure and communicate their impact in areas such as placemaking, education and community volunteering in a more holistic way.

Ultimately, the rail industry must align its business priorities with community engagement goals. This requires clarity on what it wants to achieve, why it matters, and how it will be implemented. It is vital that community leaders and practitioners actually delivering engagement within communities – such as local authorities and those in community rail – are directly involved in shaping change. Only then can community engagement and social value move from peripheral concerns to central pillars of a sustainable rail and transport strategy, both nationally and locally.

The call to action is clear: without top-down accountability and bottom-up collaboration, the full potential of rail to contribute to a fairer, more inclusive society will remain unrealised.



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Recommendations

The following points emerged from the research as practical recommendations to enable more effective community engagement across the rail industry and emphasis its importance and impact.

- A community sub-group and workstream should be established within the SSWG to offer expertise in this area, assume responsibility for bringing together the key themes in this report, and align the priorities of multiple partners. This group should collate insights and develop policy directives – led by the themes of the Sustainable Rail Blueprint – to influence those above, e.g. DfT/GBR, working alongside and drawing on expertise from across the rail industry and community rail;
- Clearer leadership and a stronger voice for community engagement in rail is needed, and should be provided via the Sustainable Rail Executive, or by greater scope being given to its social value working group, championing the importance of engagement in the wider context of sustainability;
- Community engagement, and the role it plays in facilitating and delivering greater social value, needs to be built into business cases and tenders as a mandatory element, led by DfT/GBR. This would ensure it filters down as a key consideration across all areas of the rail industry, including those not under GBR, e.g. freight, open access, supply chains etc;
- The responsibility for driving community engagement needs to be assigned at DfT/GBR level, offering clear leadership, transparency and accountability. GBR should have formal requirements placed on it to ensure effective local engagement and responsiveness to communities;
- Connectivity and information-sharing on community engagement activities must be built into project plans, particularly for larger projects. Having ownership around engagement and the social value/impact it delivers would ensure everyone is clear about their role and the benefits they can offer;
- Education around community engagement and its link to social value needs to be included in rail industry training/awareness-raising activities/resources to help overcome any knowledge gaps on this subject;
- Competition around areas such as education and information-sharing must be eradicated and not act as a barrier to engagement; enabling the whole industry to work together towards mutual benefits with open dialogue;
- Community rail should be empowered and treated by the rail industry as a key partner in terms of community engagement, using the knowledge and networks that the movement has to offer. This would ensure that the sector draws on local community voices and practitioners outside of rail to help shape its approach;
- Clear guidance and direction are needed to embed community engagement as a key part of rail reform, with similar commitments to those made in other areas, e.g. environmental and other operating/technical standards.



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