

INSIGHTS

SPRING EDITION

APRIL 2025

Sustainably transforming the built environment is not an ambition any organisation or individual can hold alone, and the challenges we face in these efforts are often shared. We must learn from each other and collaborate to implement the solutions that enact and inspire change.

Across UKGBC's diverse events and activities, interesting and actionable value emerges from the human conversations and narratives shared. We consistently hear compelling sentiments and stories from our membership, many of which we have captured and curated into this Spring 2025 edition of UKGBC Insights.

The insights were gathered at a range of industry-convening events and member engagement opportunities with a focus on key debates, challenges, ideas, and human stories within the industry's efforts to transition to sustainability.

This quarter, industry came together at FutureBuild, where we heard insights into experiences and successes, as well as taking conversations from our Leadership Programmes, Task Groups, Systems Change advisory groups, and member projects. We particularly explored the following topics:

Defining sustainability value in monetary terms

Delivering at pace

Sustainability value-add in the sales market

Data synergies and co-benefits

Curating these insights over the year helps us reveal common themes and trends around built environment sustainability challenges, solutions, and opportunities. UKGBC members can keep an eye out for upcoming events where we will explore and unpack these insights further, to help facilitate our collective ability to turn insight into action.



MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

Our 2025 **Future Leaders** cohort kicked off their innovation workshop with the question ***'Is the most sustainable option really always the more expensive option?'*** How can we demonstrate that it might not always be more expensive, and how can we take steps to improve the financial viability of sustainable options?. The group discussed the way in which advertisers fabricate a narrative about sustainability through presenting it as a 'premium', whereas sustainability has a lot of forms, some of which may be less costly, such as resource efficiency. Participants in our **Systems Change Live Project** work with alumni from the UKGBC **Systems Change Programme** and **Recalibrate Leadership Programme** are 'testing the market' to see if certain sustainable decisions actually are more costly. The group have argued that the cost of 'doing nothing on sustainability' should also be considered and can't be assumed to be zero. Factors such as negative impact on reputation and brand, resilience and longevity, and long-term value creation that considers value in more than just financial terms, also need to be considered when making the case for sustainability decisions around project viability.

Whether or not this value should be quantified, or translated into a monetary value, has been a hot topic of debate amongst our membership. It's widely understood amongst sustainability professionals that we need to move towards recognising alternative, 'softer' forms of value, put neatly by Dr. Lee Heykoop of Homes England at FutureBuild:

"We've all been learning to speak the language of finance for a long time now, while they have remained monolingual. It's about time they learn another language!"

UKGBC's Task Group for the **'Framework for a Nature-Positive Built Environment'** advised against using a definitive measurement-based 'nature positive' label, or quantifying nature positivity using certifications, for this reason. Representing an increasing shift away from the old adage 'you can only manage what you can measure'.

That still, we do continue to hear arguments in favour of quantification and ascribing monetary value:

- Quantifying value as a deterrent to destruction. Dr Cat Scott, a speaker for our Future Leaders programme from the University of Leeds **Leeds4Trees** project, found that quantifying the number of trees it would take to replace a particularly valuable one (by species, size and age), deterred people from removing the tree.
- Enhancing comparability. Quantifying impacts or value in the same unit allows us to compare the costs and benefits of different decisions – although we must recognise that many environmental and social benefits are inter-linked.
- Ascribing a monetary value allows us to evaluate against competing priorities which are also already in that language, such as cost vs client vision vs embodied carbon.
- Attendees at our February **social value masterclass** argued that being able to quantify impacts in terms of financial value can also help demonstrate where sustainability efforts may be 'greenwashing' and being implemented for show over impact.

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WHAT DOES GOOD LEADERSHIP LOOK — LIKE? —



IT'S A SPRINT WITHIN A MARATHON

In our **Winter Insights** edition, we wrote about conversations at our **Embodied Ecological Impacts** conference in November, in which some attendees warned against an overreliance on metrics and data in place of taking immediate action that we know is a move in the right direction. These sentiments were echoed at FutureBuild, with panellists tasked with the simple question ***'Are we doing enough?'*** encouraging us to focus on what we can do immediately without extra cost-benefit analysis or case studies offering proof of impact, in order to meet our organisational and political climate and ecological targets.

Embracing immediacy can be helpful on the project level too, as architects Corstophine & Wright found on the circular economy-focused Unusual Rigging HQ. Having a tight, unmoveable deadline associated with the client's anniversary combined with a rigorous approach to sustainability was helpful in getting decisions over the line. The project had a very 'bought-in' client around circularity, but it can now act as an example showing it is possible to design to circular economy principles while still delivering on time and on budget, which can be used to get buy-in from and reassure future clients.

WHAT DOES INDUSTRY NEED NEXT?



ALL ABOUT VALUE

Representatives within our **Systems Change** Live Project work have been keen to explore the appetite for, or responsiveness to, adding extra value in the sales market for sustainable building practices, to help build the viability of their ambitious projects. For example, by exploring introducing an environment levy paid for by the bills savings from energy efficient or energy generating homes. We've heard a variety of experiences of reconciling the integration of sustainability into projects without it leading to an increase in sales value.

- **The 'intangibles' of retrofit** - The project team for **Coal House**, a completed commercial deep retrofit in Cardiff, shared during our site visit that they found that it was clear that MEP upgrades alone would not be sufficient to reposition the building as an attractive place to work and increase its value. The team refer to this concept as 'the intangibles of retrofit', the things that you can't measure in terms of carbon or energy savings, but which create a building that's attractive to users and therefore commercially viable to retrofit, operate and own, in the short and long term.
- **Trust your customers** - Citu, who built the **Climate Innovation District** in Leeds, a city-centre-fringe neighbourhood with timber frame manufacturing on site designed to encourage sustainable lifestyles, found that while valuers don't increase value for sustainable design, their customers appreciate it for other reasons - especially when accompanied by education pieces about long-term cost savings available to them. Citu's approach of keeping a significant portion of the project process in-house, such as architecture, manufacturing, and internal fit-out, allowed them to lower costs by losing the mark-ups they would have faced if looking elsewhere for these services.
- **Base package idea** - Though the Climate Innovation District's residents find value in living in a sustainable property without added value in the sales market, cynics may say that these customers are few and far between. Participants within our **Systems Change** Programme have recently discussed an idea whereby customers could be offered a 'base package' with the option of 'sustainability add-ons' to better demonstrate both demand and value, and the project team would need to build in the capacity to add systems or easily retrofit.
- **New badge** - Our **Future Leaders**, also discussing the difficulty of communicating the value of sustainability and potential long-term savings to customers, questioned whether we might need a new 'badge'. They envisioned something more 'meaningful' than an EPC, but also more accessible or commonly understood than building certifications such as BREEAM or Passivhaus.

"DON'T GET INERTIA FROM THE PROCESSES. IF THE PROCESS ISN'T GIVING YOU THE OUTCOME, CHANGE THE PROCESS"

"WE NEED TO TRY TO REPLICATE PERFECTION, WHICH IS NATURE. THERE ARE NO WASTE BINS IN NATURE, THERE IS NO WASTE. WHY WOULD WE CHANGE THAT PROCESS?"



HACKING OUR HABITS FOR REDUCED ENERGY DEMAND

Increasing trends towards living alone and home-working have driven up domestic energy demand in recent years, and conversations at FutureBuild explored how we might address this.

Anna Hollyman, Co-Head of Policy and Places at UKGBC, shared an anecdote about the effects of smart meter positioning on occupant behaviour and therefore energy consumption, in which moving the smart meter in a home from inside a cupboard to the top of the occupants' staircase, where it was frequently visible, slashed their energy consumption by a third.

Other conversations at FutureBuild focused on the **Part O Building Regulations**, which cover overheating, questioning whether they may need to be accompanied by an education or upskilling piece with the general public about how to cool properties actively – shutting windows and shading in the day, and opening windows at night. Optimising building use and instigating behavioural change is an important first step towards any more technical and invasive retrofit strategy.



INDUSTRY IS EXCITED ABOUT:



DATA SYNERGIES AND CO-BENEFITS

We've heard positive anecdotes about the co-benefits of different sustainability initiatives within projects and organisations this quarter. When you make efforts to manage your impact on people and the planet from one perspective, you may inadvertently make progress (although you should also be mindful of negative unintended consequences!) in other areas of sustainability through co-benefits and synergies.

At FutureBuild, Dr Julia Baker shared an example from Mott MacDonald, who have recently looked at calculating a biodiversity footprint, and found that they already had a large amount of the data they needed to calculate it based on data collection from other areas of their sustainability work. As well as being pleasantly surprised by the amount of relevant data they already had available, the team found that they had also made progress in minimising their biodiversity footprint through intentional work elsewhere, such as circular economy efforts which had minimised their waste-related biodiversity impacts.

Architects Corstophine & Wright found similar co-benefits when looking at their embodied carbon figures for the **Unusual Rigging HQ** in Northamptonshire. The focus of the project was ambition with circular economy principles and resource use and waste reduction, and it didn't have specific embodied carbon targets. However, but they found that their circular approach had minimised embodied carbon to below the LETI standard.



“HAVE YOU MADE THE DECISION BECAUSE IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO, OR HAVE YOU CHOSEN IT BECAUSE IT'S WHAT YOU DID LAST TIME?”



HOW CAN I ACT ON INDUSTRY CONVERSATIONS?

- Create conversations in your organisation to keep sustainability on the agenda.
- Accompany retrofits with educational pieces, both about operational energy usage and active climate adaptation techniques.
- Consider how your current data may also allow you to measure other aspects of your organisation's impact.
- Take inspiration from innovative ways to add sales value to sustainable assets.
- **Join the conversation.**

