

# INSIGHTS

WINTER EDITION  
JANUARY 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 Winter edition of UKGBC Insights, covering many of our activities across October - December 2025.

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 built environment's efforts to transition to sustainability.

This quarter, we particularly explored the following topics:

***Carbon and social value-based offsetting***  
***Embodied ecological impacts***  
***Organisational sustainability 'activation gaps'***  
***Capacity-building for systemic change***

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.



## PUTTING ENERGY INTO OFFSETTING

Carbon offsetting remains a hotly discussed topic within membership, and after hosting our [Carbon Offsetting & Pricing Masterclass](#), two Offsetting Collaboration Cafés in collaboration with Buro Happold (public sector and private sector), and our [Essential Knowledge series](#) webinar 'Procuring Renewable Energy and Carbon Offsets in the Built Environment' this Winter, we've heard a range of views on the place for offsetting in the future of net zero and low carbon buildings.

### HERE'S WHAT WE HEARD...

- A preference for UK-based and even hyper-local offsetting within the same area as the project.
- There is a lot of scaling needed for engineered carbon removals to be available in significant quantities.
- As temperature increases move past 1.5C, the need for carbon removals gets stronger, and carbon offsetting and pricing will be an important tool in scaling this solution.
- Is there an opportunity to view carbon pricing as a mechanism to drive investment in decarbonisation generally, rather than just a compensation measure for not hitting emissions reduction targets or for reaching net zero?
- Could money spent on "tonne for tonne" offsetting be better spent on scaling carbon removals, even if the equivalent tonnage isn't achieved? Or looking broader, could it be better spent on scaling zero emission solutions for the built environment, or into holistic and socially-focussed solutions that facilitate a just transition?
- The critical question of whether offsetting and carbon pricing can be used in a way that truly has an impact remains at the forefront of the climate crisis. [UKGBC's Carbon Offsetting and Pricing Guidance](#) provides the built environment industry with a step-by-step process for taking a holistic approach to ambitious offsetting. The guidance was updated in June 2024 to bring it in line with the revised [Oxford Principles for Net Zero Aligned Carbon Offsetting](#) and the Integrity Council for the Voluntary Carbon Market's (ICVCM) [Core Carbon Principles Assessment Framework and Procedure](#).
- The role of carbon removal and offsetting is also being debated in developing industry standards and guidance. The Science Based Targets initiative is currently consulting on an update to its [Corporate Net Zero Standard](#), including around options for introducing interim carbon removal targets.

**"HONESTY ALLOWS US TO HAVE THE RIGHT CONVERSATIONS"**



**INDUSTRY IS EXCITED ABOUT:**



### LOCAL AND SOCIAL VALUE-BASED OFFSETTING

Conversations about local and social value-based offsetting have come up frequently at UKGBC offsetting events, such as our [masterclasses](#) and collaboration cafes.

According to the [Climate Change Committee](#), in 2021, only 0.1% of the credits purchased by UK companies in the voluntary carbon market were sourced from UK offsetting schemes. A growing local offsetting market would deliver positive environmental and social co-benefits to the UK and enable companies to more easily conduct due diligence on the offsetting projects they are supporting.

On top of this, members have been interested in the benefits of social-value based offsetting. We have seen this offered most prominently in the form of social housing retrofit. While retrofit is not a form of removal, retrofit avoidance or reduction schemes support social value and just transition.



## WHAT DOES GOOD LEADERSHIP LOOK LIKE?

### SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES OFTEN DON'T TRANSLATE WELL FROM THE TOP

'Leadership think that our sustainability strategy is brilliant, but it doesn't get reflected in our work' is a sentiment that we've heard frequently and in numerous formats. In the results of UKGBC's research collaboration with the Most Sustainable Workplace Index, **'Shifting the Foundations of Sustainability'**, senior members of an organisation consistently had more confidence in its sustainability strategy than junior members, attributed in our RoundTable discussion to issues that we have heard frequently in UKGBC **Leadership** and **Bespoke** programmes.

The first of these is an overemphasis by senior leadership on the 'comms' of their sustainability strategy, and therefore an underemphasis on the integration piece in the organisation's work. Strategic change management is required for an organisation to successfully implement its sustainability strategy but this is often missing, resulting in the 'activation gap' that we see frequently in organisations with ambitious targets.

### WHAT DOES INDUSTRY RECOMMEND?

- 'Give permission' to prioritise sustainability by building in time and capacity for sustainability conversations within all activities.
- Allocate ambitious budgets for future work, but also take proactive steps to involve sustainability in existing work.
- Ensure your teams are equipped with the technical training and leadership skills they need to implement the organisation's ambition.

**"I HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE SUSTAINABILITY GOALS OF MY ORGANISATION"**



**"LEADERSHIP ALWAYS ASK ME: "WHAT'S THE NEXT BIG THING?" BUT I THINK THAT WE HAVEN'T PROPERLY EVER ADDRESSED THE CURRENT BIG THING"**



### METRICS AND DATA - CAN WE PROGRESS WITHOUT THEM?

Our first **Embodied Ecological Impacts (EEI)** conference in November included a deep exploration of the role of metrics and data in progressing efforts to reduce EEI. The discussions produced a lot of constructive debate.

Most participants agreed that metrics, data and quantification are important and provide irreplaceable benefits to the progression of EEI reductions, but the crux of the debate concerned taking action now versus using our effort to perfect the metrics.

### PRIORITISE ACTION

- We don't want to risk action not being taken just because it is not fully quantified, when often we know it's the right decision - e.g we know that we need to minimise our need for virgin material and adopt a circular economy model.
- We wrongfully disregard certain 'ways of knowing' in work more widely, such as experience, gut feeling, and logical reasoning, in preference for replicability and methodology.
- Many analyses are coarse enough to only represent general trends, and repeating them in multiple cases would only reinforce what we already know.

### UNDERSTAND DATA

- We need a baseline or benchmark condition.
- Tools can help to encourage change even if they're imperfect.
- Data often enables meaningful action and evidence-based decisions.

In an alternative context, participants in the **Most Sustainable Workplace Index** research discussed the limitations to the ways in which we use well-established sustainability metrics, agreeing that the built environment is lacking outcome-focused metrics which evidence tangible action. An example discussed at the Roundtable event is moving from using the number of people put through sustainability training to the actions that were taken following the training. This would represent a movement from just tracking 'outputs' towards tracking more tangible 'outcomes'.

# WHAT DOES INDUSTRY NEED NEXT?



## HEAD, HAND, HEARTS... AND HONESTY

The need to place greater emphasis on 'hearts and minds' in our sustainability journeys has always been a consistent message from UKGBC membership, and this quarter we were talking about intention, honesty and community.

*'People need warmth and comfort, not radiators'*

This was a message that stuck with us from our October **Systems Change** event, following a discussion about recognising the fundamental needs that justify our intentions. This recognition builds openness to alternative mechanisms through which we can achieve desirable outcomes - i.e. looking beyond radiators to recognise that warmth and comfort is what we need allows us to explore other ways to achieve this.

This idea builds on conversations we've heard at our **Leadership** alumni events where some discussions centred on how we can build in time and space to project processes for more stakeholders to be involved in more conversations earlier on. For teams to consider their 'heart'-based reflections as well as those of 'head' and 'hands', and to dig deep into their true needs behind our intentions to consider alternative decisions and innovation that can be used in order to increase sustainability ambitions. Participants from our systems change programme discussed considering a 'RIBA Stage minus 1' to take time to explore the key purpose, intentions and needs of the project. You can read more about the questions that we need to consider in the **Systems Change Manifesto**.

Similarly to the way in which systems change participants drew on the need to connect to our intentions and emotions in project decisions, participants from the 2024 **Change Accelerator** programme spoke of the need to connect to community being particularly strong in sustainability work. They felt that a sometimes overwhelming goal is most achievable when we align with the right people, organisations, powers, or other communities which also ensure that we feel empowered and validated in our work.

As well as the project process being more 'open' by including space for conversations from the 'heart', delegates from our first **Embodied Ecological Impacts** conference stressed the importance of openness and honesty in the industry when it comes to sharing progress. Embodied Ecological Impacts is an example of an area of sustainability which is new to most organisations, and has very little guidance or industry experience - and in the development of best practice it is important to be honest about the reality of our efforts, challenges and successes in order to progress together meaningfully. A culture of embellishing our sustainability practices is not productive within the industry in the effort to build progress - put best by Will Arnold, Head of Climate Action at the Institution of Structural Engineers and panelist at the conference: *"Honesty allows us to have the right conversations"*.

The argument for more honesty within the industry is part of a conversation that comes up frequently among members concerning the balance between collaboration and competitiveness. Generally it is viewed that we need to move away from competition and towards collaboration between built environment organisations, as systemic change is only achieved when the industry moves away from silo-working to explore how we can shift the fundamental structures, rules, and relationships within the built environment system to create long-term and sustainable solutions. Some, however, have called attention to the positive role of competition internally to their organisation - such as leaderboards linked to certain sustainability metrics, as a motivating factor in driving ambition.

A different angle on 'honesty' came through in our Carbon Offsetting Collaboration Cafes with Buro Happold. We heard a lot of people coming forward with the same views - and offering ambitious and radical perspectives, but these are not perspectives that we heard publicly in industry. Perhaps, then, we need one organisation to step forward, put radical change at the forefront of their agenda, and set an example.

**"I HAVE REALISED THAT PEOPLE ARE REALLY THE BEDROCK OF BUSINESS. WE MUST ENCOURAGE OUT OF THE BOX THINKING, ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO PURSUE WHAT THEY BELIEVE AND CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT"**



## HOW CAN I ACT ON INDUSTRY CONVERSATIONS?

- Create **conversations** in your organisation to keep sustainability on the agenda.
- As a leader, focus on how to integrate and implement sustainability strategy through your organisation.
- Build in time and space to project planning to fully address its purpose, goals, and allow stakeholders to join the conversation as early as possible.
- Embrace honesty, share both your successes and your failures or lessons learnt within industry in conversations about sustainability efforts in your organisation
- **Join the conversation.**

