

SOCIAL VALUE PRACTICES IN HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS' CONSTRUCTION PROCUREMENT IN NORTH WEST ENGLAND

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Housing associations (HAs) embed social value (SV) in construction procurement processes and use social clauses as contractual Mechanisms to compel construction supply chains (CSCs) to deliver expected requirements. Whereas extant literature provides perspectives of CSCs on challenges in addressing SV through construction procurement, there is limited evidence of procurers' views on this significant matter. Given their social mission and sizeable annual construction expenditure, HAs present a unique opportunity to investigate the current nature, foci and challenges social value construction procurement (SVCP) presents in practice. Based on a review of procurement literature and policies, supported by eleven semi-structured interviews with social value managers in HAs, this paper builds on previous studies to provide context-specific insights into the socially-oriented, not-for profit housing sector use of construction works procurement to deliver SV to local areas and the challenges thereof. The findings reveal a series of interwoven and cultural challenges impeding the full realisation of expected benefits in construction procurement. The lack of policy direction and a clear definition of what constitutes SV present challenges to its advocates. The interviews reveal a series of major organisational challenges that must be overcome if social value is to be delivered effectively. These range from the need to change organisational culture to operational issues resulting from dismissive attitudes among built environment staff.

Keywords: social value, housing associations, social clauses, procurement

INTRODUCTION

'Social value' (SV) is a broad concept which can be traced back to the 19th Century mainly in arenas of business, economic and heritage literature (McShane 2006). However, following the publication of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 (SVA 2012) in England, SV has evolved as a profoundly significant concept in procurement due to its perceived ability to address social, economic and environmental issues in local areas where procurement activities are carried out (Cabinet Office 2015). Notwithstanding its long history, SV lacks a concise and consistent definition thereby leading to inconsistent practices when used within public procurement. Like other public bodies in England, housing associations (HAs) are required by the SVA to consider SV when procuring services (Chartered Institute of Housing 2015). But in practice, HAs have expanded the scope of the law to include

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construction works (Cabinet Office 2015; Chevin 2014). Under its Value for Money (VfM) Standard 2018 and Code of Practice, the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) in England, has placed obligations on HAs to deliver VfM outcomes (RSH 2018) by among other things, optimising assets and resources, and ensuring they obtain maximum benefits from commercial activities such as procurement (RSH 2018b). Hence, caught between fiscal constraints, the Regulator's VfM demands and raising societal expectations, SV has become an imperative if social impact is to be achieved (Chevin 2013). Whereas extant literature provides CSC perspectives of challenges in addressing SV through construction procurement (Loosemore 2016; Chevin 2014), there is limited evidence of procurers' views on this significant matter. Given their social mission which is supported by the use of housing assets for the good of society (Chevin 2013) along with their £6bn annual investment in new homes (Temple and Wigglesworth 2014), HAs present a unique opportunity to investigate the current nature, foci and challenges social value construction procurement presents in practice. This study is significant as it provides insights into client-side SV practices and suggests how challenges can be addressed. Furthermore, it addresses gaps not only in the wider academic social procurement literature (Barraket and Weissman 2010) but also specifically, that of construction procurement (Loosemore 2016). Commencing with a brief general background on SV, specific social procurement literature is reviewed along with eleven semi-structured interviews with social value managers to contextualise SV within construction procurement. A discussion on the approach to the study is provided followed by the results and discussions in relation to existing literature. The key contributions of the study are discussed in the conclusion.

Social Value: A Brief Background

Social value (SV) appears to date back to 1883 in Australia where it was described as building societies' "contribution to new suburban settlements" (Twopeny 1976 cited in McShane 2006: 91). Dietz and Porter (2012: 23) defined SV as "something of value for society", while Roig *et al.*, (2013) viewed the concept as the social image a customer holds about a company based on its social practices. In accounting, Barton (2000: 226) relied on the concept to argue against the use of accounting principles to value public heritage facilities, as such facilities hold a "substantial social value" to the community...which cannot be translated into financial values. In respect of what could be considered as material in organisations' sustainability reporting, the Global Reporting Initiative (2014:1) advises that an organisation's sustainability reporting topics should include those that have "a direct or indirect impact on its ability to create, preserve or erode economic, environmental and social value for itself, its stakeholders, the environment, and society at large". Likewise, McShane (2006) argued for the management of community infrastructure to consider wider account of the 'social value' of community facilities. This paper focuses on the type of SV that contributes valuable benefits to local areas through organisational operations, such as construction works procurement.

Housing Associations and SV

Housing associations, like other public bodies in England are expected by the Social Value Act 2012 to consider issues relating to social, economic and environmental well-being in procurement in order to generate added benefits for the communities they operate in. As a social business sector which uses its housing assets to "act for the good for society" (Chevin 2013: 66), it is seen as a pivotal force in addressing the shortage in housing, tackling unemployment, skills training and providing for the

vulnerable in society. However, HAs have undergone various fiscal and regulatory restructuring which impact funding (Chevin 2013). It is argued that HAs could benefit from using social value to achieve value for money (VFM) (Smedley 2013; Chevin 2013) and to improve performance, accountability and gain business advantage (Tomlins, 2015). Temple and Wigglesworth (2014:7) indicated that "many housing associations have a direct mandate, mission or duty to work for social purposes and this in turn informs their business decisions", a view supported by the Chartered Institute of Housing (2015). The above emphasises that SV is a regulatory, fiscal and ethical imperative for HAs. It is evident that HAs activities are influenced by regulatory, social and business ecological systems they operate within.

SV Construction Procurement (SVCP) in Public Bodies (PV and Shared Value)

Within the general context of procurement, SV could be perceived as an outcome, a product or a process of social procurement (SoP) or sustainable procurement (SP). SoP relates to procurers' deliberate use of purchasing power to "create social value" (Barraket and Weissman 2009: 4) or to "achieve social outcomes above and beyond the products and services required" (Bonwick and Daniels 2014: 6). The SP view affirm SV as: "A process whereby organisations meet their needs for goods, services, works and utilities in a way that achieves value for money on a whole life basis in terms of generating benefits not only to the organisation, but also to society and the economy whilst minimising damage to the environment" (DEFRA 2006, adopted by Association of Greater Manchester Combined Authorities, 2014). This paper describes Social Value Construction Procurement (SVCP) as the use of construction procurement expenditure, processes and resources to generate additional socio-economic and environmental benefits for local communities during commissioning and procurement. SVCP is a longstanding practice in response to rising demands for procurement expenditure to be used to secure added benefits for society. Starting from at least the 19th Century, proponents of SVCP argue that it can and should be used to alleviate socio-economic and environmental problems in local areas (McCrudden 2004; DEFRA 2006, International Labour Organization (ILO) 2008, Arrowsmith 2010; MacFarlane 2002). For example, the UK's Fair Wages Resolution 1891 considered how public works projects could address the social and economic needs of workmen and communities.

SVCP's theoretical basis can be seen to demand an alignment with public value (PV) (Erridge 2007) and shared value (Porter and Kramer 2012) principles. These perspectives are therefore used as lenses to investigate current practices to understand the foci, issues and challenges. Proponents of PV and shared value point to the failure of market models to deliver socio-economic and environmental goals for society. They argue that market models lead to the prioritisation of commercial goals over socio-economic benefits for society and therefore advocate a balanced approach. Erridge (2007) noted that in spite of the regulatory, commercial and socio-economic goals underpinning UK public procurement policy, there was an over-emphasis on commercial objectives. To resolve this imbalance, Erridge (2007) asserted that a 'public value' concept provides a means to assess and achieve required goals in a balanced manner through a greater emphasis on public consultation and the impacts and outcomes of procurement. In asserting that shared value is not philanthropic, PV and shared value highlight the various areas and roles of organisations in relation to their external environments ('ecological systems') in pursuit of societal benefits. They underscore the need for organisations to act as cohesive wholes to achieve organisational objectives.

In exploring the role of social enterprises in delivering social value during construction procurement, Loosemore (2016) found that traditional procurement culture and practices were hampering the involvement of social enterprises' participation in bidding for works. Loosemore revealed a lack of studies on social procurement in existing academic procurement literature. To address this gap in knowledge, Loosemore (2016) called for social procurement studies from project-based organisations. Likewise, Barraket and Weissman (2009) advocated for context-specific studies on social procurement in the not-for-profit sector following a systematic review of studies and policies on social procurement in respect of social enterprises. There have been various academic studies on social value construction procurement which have provided crucial insights into social value practices in various organisational and/or project settings (Rani *et al.*, 2019; Cartigny and Lord 2019, 2018; Mulholland *et al.*, 2019; Awuzie *et al.*, 2018; Farag *et al.*, 2016; Awuzie and McDermott 2016). However, these do not adequately examine social value practices within a specific sector and/or regional contexts and in relation to subject matter of contracts and specific SV regional policies. This gap could arguably limit understanding of social procurement practices, their issues and challenges in sector-specific contexts. Hence, this study focuses specifically on the socially oriented project-based sector in a geographical context, influenced by a common regional social value policy, in relation its use of construction works procurement to deliver social value to local areas.

METHOD

A phenomenological epistemology was used to gain an understanding of SV from research participants' experience of this reality. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were undertaken to collect primary data as opposed to observations. These interviews allowed the researcher control over the line of questioning (Creswell 2009). This allowed for SV to be understood based on individual interpretations of what it means to their organisations. The perspectives of designated SV managers in HAS produced in-depth information and valuable insight into the topic based on the depth and detail of information acquired (Denscombe 2014).

In keeping with the qualitative design for this study, an exploratory sample of eleven interviewees was used. As an exploratory study of a relatively new topic, the researchers were not seeking to generalise the findings to the population from which it was chosen but rather to generate new insights, hence, the emphasis here was not representativeness (Denscombe 2014). Interviews were tape recorded with the express consent of interviewees. Interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes. Snowball sampling was used to gain access to research participants following appropriate criteria in Bryman (2016).

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach informed the analysis of primary and secondary data in view of the aim of the study and the epistemological lens chosen for the study. Themes were identified inductively (Braun and Clarke 2006) from the interview data (Patton 1990) in line with the study's unit of analysis-definition/nature of SV in construction procurement; foci; issues; and challenges. The lead researcher transcribed all audio interview data. The transcription process helped the researcher to become familiar with the research data; and helped to identify and select themes/patterns which were of interest to the researcher for analysis and discussion (Braun and Clarke 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Four units of analysis: nature/definition, foci; issues and challenges underpin results and discussions in the context of key themes derived from social value literature, legislation, policies and interviews with social value managers.

Definitions of SV, nature of practice and drivers of social value construction procurement

The findings indicate that HAs generally conceptualise SV in construction procurement as an 'addition', a 'bonus', and/or 'help' for tenants and residents as per the principles in the Social Value Act 2012. These current views align with the wider literature which defines SV as 'something of value' (Dietz and Porter 2012: 23) and/or a 'contribution' of businesses to society (Twopeny 1976 cited in McShane 2006: 91).

Systems theory within human development (Bronfenbrenner 1979) and organisational corporate social responsibility (CSR) context (Loosemore and Phua 2011) is used here to explain HAs practices, issues and challenges. Defining a person's ecological environment as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls", Bronfenbrenner's (1979: 3) Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem and Chronosystem conceptualises the developing person in relation to their environment. Bronfenbrenner reveals that interactions between the inherent qualities of people and their environment influence their behaviour. Hence, to understand a person's choices and behaviours, one needs to consider the complex 'ecological systems' around them. Similarly, Loosemore and Phua's (2011 cited in Loosemore 2016) study of CSR activities of profit-oriented construction organisations assert that operational activities are dependent upon context-specific factors in the environment organisations operate. In his later study on social construction procurement with social enterprises, Loosemore (2016:137) suggested that the "supra-, macro-, meso- and micro-analytical framework" could be used to conceptualise "the social procurement debate at a construction project level."

Applying these ecological theoretical perspectives (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Loosemore and Phua 2011) within the context of a socially oriented, not-for-profit HAs sector, this study found that social value construction procurement is predominantly influenced by the ecological systems the sector is situated in. The regulatory, commercial and societal expectations within HAs ecological systems were crucial drivers to SV uptake and implementation in construction projects. The sector's description of social value, through to issues and challenges it encounters in efforts to secure and deliver socio-economic benefits to local area are mediated through and/or impacted by a myriad of organisational, local area, regional, national and international factors which in turn affect its social procurement behaviours and effective practices. Inherent organisational characteristics such as mission, type of service, location, size, community, building projects and tenants, interact with factors in the micro, meso, macro and supra level environments to influence how HAs define social value in construction procurement and the SV they seek to achieve for local areas. For example, HAs' definition and foci of SV are primarily influenced by organisations' strategic objectives for commissioning/procurement of building projects and perceived community needs (meso and micro level factors), the Social Value Act 2012 and a regulatory imperative to deliver SV (a macro level factor).

Similarly, regional linkages and their associated social value policies influence the adoption of social construction procurement principles at strategic levels of organisations which then drives practice at lower levels in organisations. The nature

and foci of SV in construction procurement as found in this paper is in keeping with public value (Erridge 2007) and shared value (Porter and Kramer 2012).

Furthermore, this study's findings indicate that regional linkages and inter-organisational collaborative working (meso level environmental factors) play a crucial role in addressing inconsistencies in SV implementation in construction procurement in HAs (HACT 2015) and/or low take-up in other public sector bodies (Guthrie and Opoku 2018; Cabinet Office 2015; Burke and King 2015). Strategic level managers of HAs are closely linked to Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) who have developed a social value policy for members. As a result, HAs adopt AGMA's strategic social value objectives into their own local policies to ensure a cohesive approach to tackling social issues within local communities. HAs have formed a Working Group specifically looking into SV and do benchmarking exercises among themselves with the intent to embed SV in procurement.

...a lot of this comes from our chief executive who is firmly pushing this agenda [and also] our board as well and our roots through [...]City Council... they have been pushing this agenda for the past 10-15 years in the wider ecosystem, [through] stuff like the GMCA Social Value Policy....

...our Chief Executive... and other executive members have a presence on [...] Authorities. So, they are involved with [...] and you will see from the social value policy that we've got in place that we'd actually adopted their [Authorities' name] social value policy objectives within our own to try and have a cohesive approach.

Community consultation

Community consultation is critical to delivering social value (Erridge 2007). Without good insight as to what communities actually need, SVCP requirements in contracts would go to waste (Chevin 2014). The Social Value Act 2012 suggests public bodies should consider whether communities could be consulted during the commissioning and procurement of goods and services. This study found that HAs do not generally consult the wider community to determine local needs before defining SV requirements included in construction contracts. Due to resource constraints i.e. time, cost and staff constraints, the sector generally uses four key approaches to identify SV needs of local areas, namely: internal staff, external local agencies, users of their services and primary research. These include local neighbourhood officers working with local agencies such Job Centre Plus in the local area or through undertaking their own research into areas of needs. Again, in respect of Bronfenbrenner (1979), Loosemore and Phua's (2011) studies, insights from interviews show that decisions regarding community consultations during construction procurement are contingent on inherent characteristics of the HAs, location and size of the project (mesosystem) and for project (chronosystem). The study also reveals the important roles of inter-organisational working in determining social value needs of local areas during construction procurement.

We wouldn't tend to do that [community consultations] ... our schemes are much smaller. It wouldn't be cost effective in terms of time and effort and all the rest ...

Organisational/workers' culture and attitudes

Organisational culture is defined as the way members of an organisation relate to each other, their work and their external environment compared to other organisations; this can "enable or hinder the achievement of organisational strategy" (Hofstede Insights n.d.). Hofstede states that [organisational or individual] "performance depends on the fit between strategy and culture". This study found misalignments between procurement staff's perception of their work and organisational strategic objectives to

deliver SV through construction procurement. Data from interviews reveal that "... there is still a perception that the community involvement, community investment...the "pink and fluffy stuff" ..." do not form part of built environment procurement staff's perception of their role within the procurement process. This view has in turn hindered their commitment to HAs SV agenda in construction procurement. This study also found that HAs have accessed external legal inputs to address inconsistencies, cultural attitudes and to ensure compliance with EU procurement regulations. Some HAs have worked with solicitors and consultants to develop SV tool kits which serve as guidance for procurement staff on how to embed social value into relevant procurement undertakings.

Modern procurement systems

Within the infrastructure project context, Awuzie and McDermott (2016) investigated the influence of contracting strategies in infrastructure client organisations' (ICOs) ability to implement social value within infrastructure delivery systems (IDS). They found that contracting strategies have significant impact on clients' ability to implement SV within supply chains. In respect of the aim of this study, among some of the issues and challenges impacting on SV practices, HAs suggest that although procurement systems such as Framework and land deals do not negate the opportunity to deliver SV, they offer lesser opportunities to leverage SV for local areas compared to other systems. This is because there are limited opportunities within framework procurement for bespoke questions which are predicated on specific local area needs.

... we might do a Framework call-off, so, it's already been procured, and we are just 'calling off' that Framework. So, there is less opportunity for a bespoke question...

...because the Framework covers a lot of organisations with very different footprints to ours, how they define 'local' on the framework isn't how we would define 'local'. They say that 'local' should be within 20- mile radius of the site but we are only 9 miles end-to-end. So, if we were to be 20 miles from the site, we would be well into North Wales or Manchester and that in terms of the community that we work with, doesn't sit with what we see as local.

In contrast to Awuzie and McDermott (2016), the link between contracting strategy, and successful SV implementation and delivery in this study's view, is tenuous.

Communication, resource limitations and organisational priorities

Effective monitoring of social value embedded in contracts is essential to the achievement of desired outcomes (Cabinet Office 2015). However, without effective communication between relevant functional areas of HAs, monitoring of SV delivery can be hampered. This study found this crucial element in securing SV, lacking between HAs SV managers and built environment staff on construction sites.

According to Erridge (2007), a lack of balance between regulatory, commercial and social objectives in public procurement strategies can compromise delivery of public value. This study found some tensions between HAs regulatory, commercial and social procurement objectives. Although SV is promoted as critical to meeting RSH requirements and social mission, interviews suggests HAs tend to relegate SV monitoring and reporting as a secondary consideration during the construction phase of projects in favour of commercial goals in relation to quick completion and rental income from letting homes. Therefore, project-based construction teams give maximum attention to delivering projects to specified quality and timescales to meet such strategic objectives rather than social value.

The main challenge has been the relationship with the development team-getting them to remember to send me the information ... They are supposed to share the information

with me on a monthly basis so I can monitor it...and the biggest challenge has been getting the information from people.

...a lot of the time people are more interested in...if it is building a wall, they are more interested in the wall - 'Is it the right height and the right quality?', than they are in who actually built it ... if they are being told: 'you've got to have these houses done'. 'You've got to get them built on time, because we need to get them let', then that is what they are going to put their effort onto.

CONCLUSIONS

As a social oriented project-based sector, HAs sector are mandated by their mission, legal and regulatory frameworks to use their assets and resources to deliver social value to communities they operate in. As such, the sector presented a unique opportunity to understand the definitions, foci and challenges of social value in construction procurement (SVCP) in light of the dearth of academic studies from not-for-profit, client-side of the social procurement debate. Using a qualitative approach and a semi-structured interview method with social value managers, the study found that HA nature/definitions of and activities carried out in respect of social value in construction procurement are influenced by complex interactions between their intrinsic characteristic and wider environmental factors (ecological systems). Regional level linkages influenced SV policies at organisational levels while use of external consultants was seen as an approach to addressing inconsistencies in practice and complying with regulatory frameworks in the sector. However, organisational and worker's culture and perception of their roles adversely impact effective SVCP practices. HAs do not prioritise SV in the same way as time and cost objectives. This has affected the culture and attitude of key built environment staff who are under pressure to meet top priorities of building projects. Furthermore, poor communication and lack of resources also hamper effective reporting and monitoring of SV being delivered by the supply chain during construction of projects. It is suggested that strategic management make SV a primary objective if it is serious about delivering such benefits for local areas. Management could also take a proactive approach in ensuring operational activities are well resourced to enable monitoring and reporting of SV. Built environment staff on site responsible for monitoring and reporting could to be given the necessary support to motivate buy-in.

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