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ESG SUMMIT 2026

The takeaways

CEO'S MESSAGE

SAM MCCLARY
CEO | BCO

The BCO's mission is to enable the design, development, and operation of truly excellent workspaces.

If we're serious about that mission, then it is vital that we enable experts in the sector to deliver buildings that don't just "do no harm" to our planet, our places and society, but that add something positive back. And that means creating truly sustainable and equitable places. Places that we can be proud of. Places that people can feel part of. Places that endure.

That's why we delivered the 2026 ESG Summit in March and that's why we've pulled together this review of the day. A day that was full of debate, discussions and a whole host of big takeaways.

We hope you enjoy this synopsis of the event, that you took away plenty of your own key messages and you'll join us again at future BCO events where we promise to continue to ask the big questions that challenge us to push harder and lead by example.

And in the meantime, please make sure to interact with us on LinkedIn or drop us an email to mail@bco.org.uk with anything - and everything - you'd like to see from your BCO this year and in the future.

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BEYOND THE BACKLASH: THE FUTURE OF ESG INVESTING

In a world where viability remains the biggest challenge facing the industry, has ESG fallen down the agenda, or are investors still putting their cash in environmentally-supportive projects?

This was the big question we sought to answer with a panel of experts including Cecile Babcock of EDGE, Amber Luscombe of Oxygen AM and Alex Edwards of Bruntwood SciTech.

They concluded that real estate industry's next five years would be defined less by whether ESG "matters" and more by how quickly organisations can standardise data, prove outcomes, and future-proof assets in a world of rising expectations.

Across investors, developers, occupiers, and lenders, the message was clear: ESG hasn't disappeared - it has matured.

KEY MESSAGE *ESG is now part of the expected baseline of underwriting, transaction due diligence, and long-term asset strategy.*

ESG HAS BECOME EMBEDDED

Although ESG is mentioned less explicitly these days, our experts agreed that it hasn't faded; it has simply become part of the standard investment and asset-management process.

ESG language has shifted towards "resilience", "longevity" and "sustainability", but the underlying priorities remain intact. It is no longer a tick-box exercise, with investors now demanding evidence, not just certifications. Asset managers today must prove rental premiums, value protection, or risk mitigation linked to ESG activity.

Occupier demand is one of the strongest forces keeping ESG alive, said our panelists, as major corporates with net-zero commitments will not lease "brown" space, regardless of price.

FINANCIAL RISK, LIQUIDITY & FUTURE PROOFING

ESG today is as much about risk management as it is about positive impact.

Our expert panel outlined three key areas of risk:

- **Liquidity risk**: Non-compliant buildings appeal to a shrinking pool of investors, raising cost of capital and reducing exit options.
- **Regulatory risk**: EPC requirements, net-zero carbon standards, and local planning policy are major forces shaping investment decisions.
- **Cap-ex miscalculation risk**: Early due diligence is essential. Poor ESG assessments can leave buildings stranded with costly, sometimes impossible upgrades.

They said that delivering ESG compliant buildings was now part of all lending conversations and that sustainable KPIs were now standard in most loan agreements.

Speakers also referenced that energy price volatility and geopolitical instability, was strengthening the case for buildings that are energy-efficient and resilient.

KEY MESSAGE *The narrative has moved from "ESG might generate a premium" to "poor ESG guarantees a discount and potential illiquidity."*

CONVERGENCE IS ACCELERATING

The panel highlighted several regional differences when it came to maturity levels around ESG investing. The US, they said, is highly polarised, with states like California and New York leading the way when it comes to ESG, while others, such as Texas and Florida, are backtracking and passing anti-ESG legislation.

Canada and Europe, particularly the Nordics and Benelux, are among the most advanced, with stringent internal requirements, while in Asia investors still require education, with lingering perceptions that sustainability increases cost. Asian investors tend to prioritise return first and need evidence of ESG's financial upside, said our experts.

The Middle East, current situation aside, paints a mixed picture, said out panel, with some sustainability interest driven by the need to offset fossil-fuel-linked portfolios.

Despite these differences, all regions are experiencing the same pressures from occupiers, lenders, and global capital flows and ultimately moving in the same direction - towards higher expectations and better data.

KEY MESSAGE *Anyone raising capital globally must tailor their ESG messages appropriately: lead with financial evidence for some regions; lead with governance and reporting standards for others. "*

PROTECTING ASSET VALUE IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

With more extreme weather conditions occurring more frequently, asset owners' resilience measures increasingly need to go beyond compliance and speak directly to commercial viability – particularly for older building stock.

Cundall partner Simon Wyatt, in conversation with Legal & General's Katherine Thorogood, Bidwells' Helen Newman and RLAM's Laura Thrower, highlighted both physical risks - such as overheating and flooding - and transitional risks linked to energy and technology.

A key transitional risk, they said, is the current wave of regulation and frameworks, including EU and UK disclosure standards, which is increasing pressure on the market and driving more extensive due diligence at the planning stage, as investors seek reassurance on risk exposure.

THE COMPLIANCE/PRACTICALITY DISCONNECT

Despite regulatory momentum, a disconnect remains between compliance requirements and practical steps that meaningfully improve an asset's resilience.

Katherine Thorogood, senior responsible investment strategist at Legal & General Investment Management, said: "You have to ask yourself: am I just meeting the requirements or do I want to address the bigger picture? Push yourself to understand the specific use case and collect data that is granular to each asset. Only then can you combine sources of information into something meaningful for each specific decision process."

To support resilience in day-to-day asset management, the panel saw a need for closer alignment between fund-level strategy and operational delivery.

Laura Thrower, senior responsible property investment manager at Royal London Asset Management, said: "Flood risk is the number-one priority for insurability. Then decarbonisation and overheating come into play when you're assessing risk versus opportunity over the next 25-40 years. The flood risk reviews then inform mitigation strategies."

One potential solution came from Thorogood, who said LGIM was developing a climate adaptation toolkit to support decision-making and to help identify quick wins that can be incorporated into regular refurbishment cycles. These range from raising plug heights to relocating critical plant, offering a practical route to future-proof assets.

BAU NOT BURDEN

The panel agreed that multi-let offices often present more opportunities for intervention than those let to single occupiers on longer leases, as access constraints can limit improvements. Engaging with occupiers to raise awareness of the benefits can help embed resilience as "business as usual" rather than an additional burden.

However, panellists warned that strategies will only evolve at the pace required once broader risks are reflected in asset valuation.

Helen Newman, executive director, group sustainability at Bidwells, said the UK still lags behind parts of Europe in adaptation strategy, with design choices such as extensive glazing and reliance on mechanical cooling increasing exposure. "There are small ways to deliver more comfortable spaces and support the transition towards net zero - from using more reflective materials to considering how buildings respond to their surroundings in dense urban environments," she said.

Thorogood added that the industry must develop a more holistic understanding of how each design decision influences another - including the knock-on effects of mechanical cooling.

THE POWER OF PERFORMANCE DATA

The discussion then turned to occupier expectations. The panel acknowledged the tension between perceived comfort and the energy required to deliver it. The most important step, they agreed, is improving the quality and accuracy of building performance data. "That way, we can ensure we are providing feedback to occupiers about how the building is operating and whether it is meeting the standards of its potential," said Thorogood.

Key takeaways from the discussion included:

- The importance of aligning with occupier interests and engaging stakeholders to understand their priorities
- Understanding risks early and embedding them at every stage of the asset lifecycle
- The collection of targeted data that genuinely supports decision-making

Ultimately, the priority must be to identify the thresholds at which climate impacts become real and felt, said our panel. Only when risk, mitigation, operations and occupier experience converge will the market respond at the scale and speed needed.

INNOVATION V GIMMICK: THE POWER OF EARLY ADOPTION

The real estate industry is rich with ideas, momentum, and technical capability, but is still hampered by systemic barriers that slow the adoption of innovation. Despite this, the direction of travel is positive. To dive deeper into this topic AET Flexible Workspace brought together FORE Partnership's Basil Demeroutis, Stiff + Trevillion Architects' Dan Campbell, WSP's Josh Sykes and Material Index's Rob Smith to help us ensure that innovation genuinely advances sustainability in the office sector. AET's Karl Stauss led the conversation.

EMBED INNOVATION EARLY

For proper innovation to take place it must be locked into the process early, said our experts. Allow it to be treated as an add-on or a nice-to-have and it becomes a gimmick at best and a failure at worst.

Our speakers highlighted that by RIBA Stage 3, up to 80% of embodied carbon is already locked in, meaning late-stage innovation is too little, too late. The supply chain's atomisation - with millions employed across mostly micro-firms - makes change even harder unless it is embedded from the start.

To ensure early adoption our panel recommended:

- Creating innovation maps at RIBA Stage 0-1
- Mandating innovation as part of the core workstream
- Running innovation trackers throughout the project lifecycle
- De-risking and cost-testing ideas upfront so they can be written directly into contracts

This structure, they said, prevents innovation being sidelined by deadlines, procurement stages, or risk aversion. Without embedding it early, the programme, cost managers and contractors dictate what survives - and sustainability innovations inevitably fall away.

BUILD THE CASE IN THE CLIENT'S LANGUAGE

The biggest blocker to innovation isn't the technology — it's communication.

Engineers and designers know the technical solutions, but often fail to translate their value into terms clients care about: cost, risk, operational efficiency and long-term asset value.

Our panel cited examples such as innovative ideas initially being rejected but later brought back in through value engineering, oversized M&E systems being installed because clients perceive smaller systems as risky, and clients being persuaded to change direction only after real-world performance data has showed how their systems were massively under-utilised

To win support, sustainability innovations must be framed as a business decision, not just an environmental one, said our experts.

This includes quantifying:

- Capital savings from designing-out materials
- Embodied carbon reduction as cost efficiency
- Reduced operational energy translating into service charge competitiveness
- How innovation aligns with corporate brand values and tenant expectations

The most persuasive argument is increasingly emotional and brand-led: buildings that express a company's values win.

KEY MESSAGE

If the industry wants innovation to stick, it must institutionalise it. Start early, define clearly, de-risk collaboratively, and make it contractual.

LOOK BEYOND THE TECH

Perhaps the strongest theme throughout the discussion was that innovation isn’t only technology. Much of the industry’s future lies in reuse and circularity, process innovation - such as sequencing, procurement reform or behaviour change - supply-chain engagement, and designing for long life, loose fit and enabling adaptable environments over decades.

Panelists said that success depended not on just on futuristic tech, but on culture, collaboration and de-risking and called on the industry must help small contractors to innovate through training, simplification and alignment, said our experts. Without bringing the long tail of the supply chain along, sustainable innovation will fail on the ground.

KEY MESSAGE

Innovation in sustainability is as much cultural and procedural as technological. Prioritise reuse, adaptability, supply-chain upskilling and simple, scalable solutions.

INNOVATION VS GIMMICK: RAISING THE BAR

PARTNER INSIGHT

KARL STAUSS
HEAD OF CLIENT DELIVERY

AET Flexible Space
Under Floor Air Conditioning

A standout discussion from the summit explored a key question: How do we distinguish real innovation from industry “noise”? The consensus was clear: innovation must be: buildable + proven + scalable. Not conceptual or purely aesthetic.

As highlighted during our panel discussion, the industry must prioritise solutions that deliver measurable outcomes over time. This aligns with a broader challenge: productivity in construction has stagnated, highlighting the need to invest in meaningful, performance-driven innovation.

Beyond metrics, the human dimension of ESG also came through strongly. FORE Partnership's Basil Demeroutis, noted that performance must be paired with storytelling and grounded in authenticity, connection and clarity. Data supports this direction with workplace quality havng been shown to direct impact productivity and retention.

This reinforces the idea that ESG is not just about buildings - it is about people, experience and long-term value creation.

The BCO ESG Summit brought together industry leaders to openly discuss the evolving role of ESG within the built environment and from our perspective, it reinforced a clear shift in mindset across the industry. ESG is no longer viewed as an aspirational framework, but as a measurable and accountable standard that must be embedded into every stage of a project.

The conversations throughout the day highlighted the growing importance of delivering real performance, backed by data, rather than relying on intent alone.

One of the most valuable aspects of the event was the honesty of the discussions. There was a strong focus on bridging the gap between ambition and delivery, recognising that while innovation is essential, it must also be practical, scalable, and capable of delivering long-term value. This was particularly evident in the “Innovation vs Gimmick” panel, where we were pleased to contribute to a dialogue around meaningful, buildable solutions that genuinely support ESG outcomes.

The Summit also provided a fantastic platform for collaboration. Bringing together developers, consultants, engineers, and occupiers created a well-rounded and insightful exchange of perspectives. These conversations extended beyond the stage, with networking sessions offering the opportunity to connect with peers, share experiences, and continue important discussions around the future of sustainable workplaces.

What stood out most to us was the collective commitment to progress. There is a growing recognition that ESG is not a standalone initiative, but a shared responsibility across the entire project lifecycle. This requires closer collaboration, clearer communication, and a willingness to challenge traditional approaches.

For AET, the event reaffirmed our belief in delivering solutions that prioritise performance, flexibility, and long-term sustainability. It also highlighted the importance of continuing to engage in these industry conversations, contributing to a more informed and accountable approach to workplace design and delivery.

Overall, the BCO ESG Summit 2026 was a highly valuable and thought-provoking event. It not only reflected where the industry is today but also provided a clear sense of direction for where it needs to go next.

REVIVING THE PAST FOR THE SAKE OF THE FUTURE

Adaptive reuse is increasingly recognised as a vital strategy in sustainable development, but significant tensions arise when considering how best to unlock the opportunities that lie within heritage buildings. To explore the issues and potential solutions, the BCO convened an expert panel co-chaired by Zoe Neill, UK & Ireland sustainability lead at NDY, and Phil Kelly, partner at Ridge & Partners.

STEWARDSHIP IS A KEY DRIVER IN DELIVERY

The debate began by exploring the motivations behind two recent projects: Trinity Road, a Grade II listed refurbishment in Halifax, and New Zealand House, a renovated 1960s office building in London. These included improving the condition of existing infrastructure, meeting 2030 net zero targets, supporting local commitments and working sensitively with heritage assets.

Becky Valentine, a sustainable heritage and building health consultant at Spenbeck, highlighted the importance of stewardship as a key driver in pushing for outcomes “higher than the minimum”. Considering an occupier’s presence as “one moment in the building’s story”, she said, creates a responsibility to think about how that building will be represented a century from now.

But does working with heritage assets inevitably mean navigating constant restrictions?
Kye Taylor, head of engineering and preconstruction at Multiplex Construction, noted that the challenge lies in retaining and celebrating the existing building while still targeting “best in class” performance.

Heritage projects, he argued, offer the opportunity to think beyond the immediate upgrade and consider a much longer future. Durability of materials, strengthening foundations and other interventions can significantly extend a building’s lifespan - but only with a shift in mindset.

“Asset flipping still drives shorter options because of return on investment,” he said. “If we take a longer-term view, we can make more meaningful changes.”

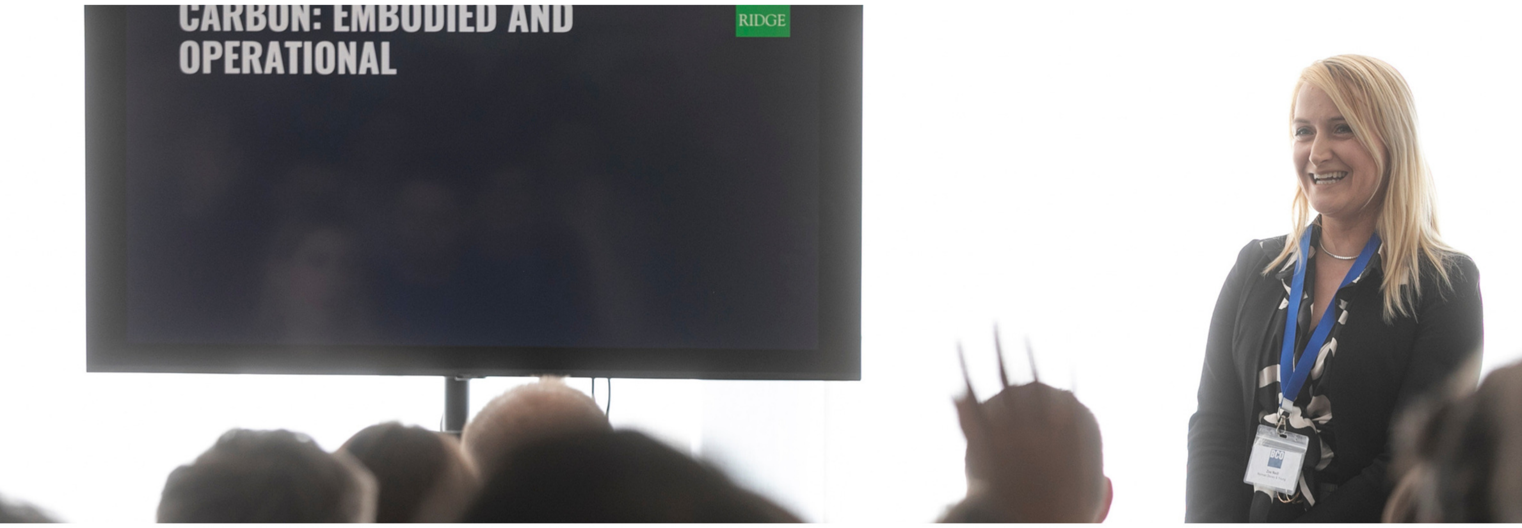
SOME LIMITATIONS ARE UNAVOIDABLE

Valentine acknowledged that some limitations are unavoidable. “Sometimes you might be restricted on things like accessibility compliance, and that can affect the types of businesses that will want the space. But for the right user, you don’t have to compromise on design. Occupiers choose these buildings because they have a history and a story,” she said.

Upgrading an existing building, however, is not always an easy sell. Joe Tetley, senior manager - standards and assurance at Lloyds Banking Group, observed that demonstrating added value can be challenging. “In some ways, you’re left with the equivalent of a new structure, but the financials don’t always recognise that - it becomes a perception issue,” he said.

Paul Boyle, partner at Ridge & Partners, reflected on the complexity of navigating variations and multiple design options during heritage refurbishments. “It can be challenging,” he said, “but once you look at what’s been achieved versus the available new-build stock, it’s often better.”

He described working with Tetley’s team at Trinity Road to reduce costs without compromising ESG outcomes that were fundamental to both the client and the building, such as thermal comfort. By prioritising what mattered most and deferring elements that could be addressed once the workplace was back in use, the building “now outperforms what it was originally designed to do”.



EDUCATION IS ESSENTIAL

The panel also noted that a shortage of conservation officers and varied levels of understanding within planning departments can limit the potential of heritage reuse. Personal preferences - for or against certain architectural styles - can also create obstacles. “If we want to drive more heritage retrofit, then we need to educate,” Valentine said.

Despite these challenges, there was consensus that the industry was getting better. It was understanding risks more clearly, recognising the skills required and, in London at least, seeing project costs increasingly stack up. In regional cities, however, the economic equation remains more difficult.

The debate concluded with the panel offering three pieces of advice for those considering a heritage retrofit project:

1. Align project motives with the priorities of target occupiers, such as B Corps or ESG-focused organisations.
2. Recognise that while the existing structure can accelerate delivery once underway – enabling earlier conversations around prelets – the upfront process may take longer.
3. Remain flexible in design: plans may need to adapt in response to the realities of the building, but this often leads to a more successful outcome.

USE LESS STUFF: MATERIAL INNOVATION AND REUSE IN THE OLD AND NEW

In the world of office design, development and operation, we understand the urgency of cutting embodied carbon and material waste, but how do we deal with fragmented supply chains, risk-averse commercial norms, and practical barriers?

Those were the questions we sought to answer in our Use Less Stuff panel discussion, hosted by Civic's Julian Broster, at the BCO's recent ESG Summit.

Here we dig into three core themes from the conversation - which featured expert insights from Alan McBride at Muse, Harriet Browning from Civic, Rachel Hoolahan from Orms and Ben Myers from Morris + Company - that should help shape a lower-material, lower-carbon future for office design and development.

BUILD A CIRCULAR SUPPLY CHAIN - NOT JUST CIRCULAR BUILDINGS

A major blocker identified across the panel was scale: reuse currently depends on individual determination, ad-hoc logistics and project-by-project heroics. Designers may want to reuse steel, ceilings or stone, but unless suppliers, contractors and demolition teams operate with circular business models, material reuse remains expensive, time-consuming and difficult.

Our experts emphasised that:

- Suppliers must be incentivised to take back, refurbish and resell materials
- Designers need to specify with flexibility in mind - e.g. not locking down exact tile sizes years before procurement so reused products can actually be used.
- Logistics hubs near urban centres are essential to avoid transporting materials long distances (which can wipe out carbon benefits).
- The biggest wins occur when suppliers can guarantee consistency, storage and warranties - services designers cannot provide alone.

The mainstream supply chain must shift its business model so reused materials become as easy to procure as new ones.

KEY MESSAGE

We don't need a Vinted for buildings - we need H&M to take back its clothes.

OVERCOMING PERCEPTION, RISK AND COMMERCIAL NORMS

There still exists the perception that new is better, particularly among investors, fund managers and regional markets. Even when reuse strategies might save money, warranties, insurance restrictions and late contractor involvement often push teams back to business-as-usual.

Key problems identified included:

- **Risk aversion**: Developers, insurers and contractors often see reused materials as untested.
- **Misaligned incentives**: Developers aim to minimise grant funding; tenants rarely see fit-out waste; asset managers focus on lettability and aesthetics.
- **Programme rigidity**: Standard programmes rarely allow time for careful disassembly or reuse.
- **CAT A fit-outs**: Universally criticised as wasteful, yet still driven by leasing norms and tenant expectations.

Examples like reused gym floors, recycled flooring, or ultra-high-strength precast facades show that good solutions exist, but require early engagement, willingness to challenge norms, and clearer mechanisms for valuing circularity.

Policy levers (VAT reform on retrofit, mandatory reuse assessments, enhanced BREEAM/SCORING credits) can nudge the market while shifting perceptions.

KEY MESSAGE *Using less stuff must be seen as a commercial benefit, not an ESG add-on.*

MAKE BUILDINGS EASY TO ADAPT, DISASSEMBLE AND LOVE

Using less stuff starts with designing buildings that can last, adapt and be taken apart. This doesn't necessarily mean over-designing grids or structures for hypothetical future uses, instead, it means thoughtful design that enables longevity without excess.

This includes designing components for disassembly rather than glue (literally and figuratively); avoiding aesthetic overhauls every 30 - 40 years by creating timeless, high-quality spaces people want to keep; challenging briefs that specify unnecessary finishes or rigid layouts; seeing buildings as kits of parts - durable, movable and maintainable; and learning from the past. Older buildings, said our panel, survive precisely because they were built simply and robustly.

KEY MESSAGE *Good design is futureproof design. The less we need to rip out, the less we need to build.*

USE LESS STUFF: SYSTEM THINKING AND MATERIAL REUSE

PARTNER INSIGHT

JULIAN BROSTER
COO
CIVIC

Steel from an Oxford Street department store, a university gym floor and slabs of Carrara marble - the story of future resilience is increasingly being written in reused materials. Tactics for material reuse are gaining momentum in existing assets, but just as important are sustainable approaches to new-build, implementing future-thinking and adaptability.

It was a pleasure to be joined by Alan McBride at Muse, Rachel Hoolahan at Orms, Ben Myers at Morris & Company and my colleague Harriet Browning at Civic, for our panel at the BCO ESG Summit, exploring one central question: what does it mean to build using less and share more?

We discussed how we can collectively overcome barriers, with logistics, fragmented supply chains and siloed thinking, amongst the backdrop of challenging development viability, cited as major hurdles. As Harriet noted, while “reusing structures can feel like it depends on the dogged determination from design teams," there are also many encouraging moves and initiatives like the Engineers Reuse Collective that are helping to scale collaboration.

Designing for adaptability - whether through enhanced technical specifications, flexible layouts, or higher-quality materials - was shared as a way to futureproof assets. Our panel shared their honest reflections, and encouraged greater industry-wide discussion of successes and lessons learnt. Planning policy, tax reform, and certification schemes were all also cited as levers for change.

Despite the challenges we face, broader optimism remains with a positive look to the future. The potential to reuse is enormous. But it requires a shift in mindset toward a more resourceful, resilient approach to design. Continuing the theme of developments shifting the dial, we joined Landsec in sharing the story of The Republic as part of the ESG Summit walking tours.

As the first building to come forward as part of the £1.5bn, 20-acre Mayfield regeneration, The Republic is a new 300,000 sq ft gfa office building set within Manchester’s multi-award-winning Mayfield Park.

This green building, in colour and purpose, will be beside the River Medlock and is set to offer an unrivalled place to work in Manchester city centre, very close walking distance to Manchester’s biggest public transport hub, with market-leading environmental and wellbeing credentials.

Civic are providing civil, structural, geoconsultancy and transport engineering services, along with archaeology services through our heritage team, for The Republic, working in collaboration with a design team that includes architect Morris & Company, WSP and Deloitte.

With high sustainability and carbon aspirations, The Republic will set the standard for good design when it comes to large new-build commercial buildings.

It’s a landmark development here in Manchester and a milestone in the Mayfield regeneration, which is delivering transformational change. If you would like to hear more about the project or takeaways from our panel, please do get in touch.

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST: DELIVERING BETTER PLACEMAKING THROUGH SOCIAL VALUE

What does "social value" actually look like? And how do we place a value on it? These were the questions posed by Guy Battle, CEO and founder of Social Value Portal, as he invited four industry figures to outline how their organisations are approaching the topic.

PEOPLE, NOT PROFIT, FIRST

Jo Harrop, director at social enterprise PLACED, opened the discussion by challenging what she saw as the often tokenistic approach to community engagement that persists across the built environment.

The assumption that "people will always want what they can't have - and we know what they actually need" no longer stands, she said. Meaningful engagement, she argued, requires creating space for more voices, because "the more we listen, the better places we create".

This struck a chord with Sam Jarrett, head of marketing and communications at LandSec, who explained how a people-first philosophy had shaped the vision for Mayfield, a 24-acre regeneration site behind Manchester's Piccadilly Station. He said converting the existing Depot building into a cultural venue and delivering a new city centre park before bringing buildings forward had established an early foundation for long-term community benefit from the project.

Importantly, identifying where social value initiatives will have the biggest impact can directly enhance asset performance, because strong placemaking naturally strengthens the bottom line, said Nathan Murray, senior surveyor at Cushman & Wakefield.

"The best social value initiatives are commercially profitable," he said. "Every investor wants to see the community benefit – but even more so when it also benefits the bottom line."

Katerina Papavasileiou, director of ESG and responsibility at Federated Hermes, reflected on the challenges of embedding social value metrics throughout an asset's lifecycle.

Timeframe, she argued, is often the defining factor: long-term investment horizons support more resilient and sustainable places – and ultimately better returns – while shorter cycles make it harder to evidence the financial contribution of ESG and social value. Although the effort invested in activating a place is invariably returned, she highlighted that underwriting processes typically account far more clearly for climate-related sustainability than for social outcomes.

However, while the panel acknowledged the importance of quantifying metrics such as job creation or increased local spending, they agreed that social value extends far beyond measurable outputs. Jarrett said it was a civic responsibility and urged the sector to consider the experiential dimension of place.

Papavasileiou added that placemaking also relates to risk. Without thoughtful design and sustained investment, developments can quickly lose relevance.

"If you don't consider good placemaking, then in five years' time nobody will visit your development, and it will have no value because it becomes a place people don't choose to be in," she said.

GENUINE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

With issues such as loneliness and happiness harder to define, the panel debated whether the clear, legislated metrics associated with sustainability - such as emissions standards - placed it higher on the agenda than social value.

While measurement may prove difficult with complex concepts like loneliness, the exerts said they also became highly tangible when rooted in direct community conversations about how life can be better. Jarrett said that many social value interventions were straightforward enhancements to everyday experience. “Green space, better Wi-Fi, more places to sit… these are all no-brainer priorities,” he said.

This highlighted the importance of genuine community engagement, said Harrop, emphasising the value of long-term thinking that responds directly to what local people need rather than relying on short-term interventions. “Asking people what they want early on can support the design brief and give people hope that they can actually impact change,” she said.

Key takeaways from the discussion included:

- A need for a more standardised language and framework around social value to support and enable wider industry uptake
- When social value begins to influence occupier decision-making and market desirability, it will quickly rise up the agenda
- Climate adaptation and social wellbeing are inseparable: when overheating makes a space uncomfortable, it becomes as much an issue of social value as sustainability.

MAKING THE JUMP TO ZERO: HOW TO MAKE NET ZERO OFFICES A UK-WIDE REALITY

The property sector is better equipped to deliver net zero offices than ever before, yet fragmented policy, inconsistent market signals, and persistent misconceptions about cost continue to constrain progress. In this session Arup's Stephen Hill gathered insights from Deepika Singhal from Hollis, Katie Wray from Deloitte, Katie Clemence-Jackson from the UK Net Zero Carbon Building Standard and Richard Treanor-Smith from the Government Property Agency, all focused on how we can make net zero achievable for all.

WE NEED STRONGER, CLEARER POLICY

Across the panel, there was consensus that market forces have surged ahead of policy in driving net zero office delivery. Demand has shifted decisively towards "Grade A" sustainable space - high-performing buildings with NABERS ratings, strong transport links, and wellness features. Agents are increasingly setting high ESG expectations in RFIs, and investors are actively using whole-life carbon analysis to inform decisions.

However, this momentum is neither consistent nor guaranteed. Beyond London, the last decade has seen a "policy vacuum" where local guidance either lagged behind industry ambition or created wide variability in expectations. Emerging policy frameworks, such as Places for Everyone in Greater Manchester, are helping, but viability caveats and differing regional approaches still create uneven delivery.

National planning guidance, embodied-carbon requirements, and mandatory operational disclosure would help close the gap, said our experts.

KEY MESSAGE

Market ambition can drive early adopters, but only clear, aligned policy can deliver scale, consistency, and confidence.

RETROFITTING THE REAL DECARBONISATION FRONTIER

New builds receive disproportionate attention, but the path to net zero offices in the UK runs overwhelmingly through retrofitting. Examples from the panel ranged from the refurbishment of the Art Deco Sunlight House in Manchester to a façade replacement on the city's Grade II listed Pall Mall Court achieving massive improvements in energy efficiency.

Examples shared by our panelists proved that:

- Deep retrofit is possible even in highly constrained heritage environments.
- Upgrading fabric and systems can deliver strong letting performance and commercial returns.
- Embodied carbon considerations often make retrofit the best carbon - and financial - decision.

Importantly, many existing buildings participating in the UK Net Zero Carbon Building Standard pilot achieved alignment without major structural intervention, said UK NZCBS chief executive Katie Clemence-Jackson, relying instead on optimisation, controls, and modest upgrades.

What's needed now, however, is wider education, more consistent green-lease mechanisms, and greater investor confidence that retrofit enhances asset value and resilience.

CONSISTENCY IS ESSENTIAL

The UK Net Zero Carbon Building Standard was repeatedly singled out as the biggest opportunity for accelerating the transition. Its importance lies in creating a consistent, science-based, industry-led definition of net zero, backed by third-party verification and rooted in actual operational performance, not predictions.

This closes the accountability gap that has long plagued UK buildings: the divide between "as-designed" and "in-use" performance. The Standard should also enable:

- alignment between landlords and tenants (via separate pathways)
- comparability across projects and regions
- market confidence that "net zero carbon" claims are credible
- future integration into policy and finance mechanisms

Our experts concluded that consistent metrics would allow the market to pull in the same direction, giving policymakers the confidence to lock ambition into regulation.

KEY MESSAGE

Scaling retrofit - not new build - is where the UK can achieve the fastest and cheapest carbon savings.

A MARKET THAT'S REGAINING MOMENTUM

PARTNER INSIGHT

DEEPIKA SINGHAL
DIRECTOR, HEAD OF ESG & SUSTAINABILITY
HOLLIS

Attending the BCO Summit and taking part in a panel discussion, was timely and energising, bringing together a range of perspectives from across the industry at a point of real transition for the office sector.

One thing is clear: The market is regaining momentum and the office sector is bouncing back. Office take-up is increasing as more and more organisations mandate at least three days a week in the office.

Occupiers are also increasingly clear about what they want.

With 60% of demand for Grade A space, high performing, resilient workspaces that align with net zero carbon ambitions are essential, alongside modern amenities and strong transport links. ESG is no longer a differentiator, it's becoming a baseline.

Despite this demand, the supply of new, top-tier office space remains limited, particularly outside London. New-build pipelines across major UK cities are thin, and with delivery times typically stretching two to three years, this only strengthens the case for retrofitting existing stock.

In an ideal world, ESG alone would be enough to justify retrofit and secure strong rental returns. However, rising construction costs mean the commercial case is more complex. That's why we frame the conversations we have with clients differently. This isn't just about ESG credentials anymore, it's about resilience and futureproofing assets so they don't become stranded or financially burdensome.

Whole life carbon and cost analysis are critical tools in identifying the right route forward. In some cases, a lighter touch refurbishment and electrification strategy may offer the lowest embodied carbon solution and the best return on investment.

In others, a deeper retrofit or retrofitted extension may deliver stronger long-term value.

Where neither option stacks up, repurposing an asset for an entirely different use may be the right answer. Early viability studies can be the real gamechanger here.

The growing alignment between climate resilience and net zero as drivers of long-term asset value is clear. These are no longer "nice to haves," they are fundamental to whether buildings remain viable, lettable and relevant.

The BCO ESG Summit was a powerful reminder that the decisions we make today will shape the assets that succeed tomorrow.

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