Cooperative Councils' Innovation Network

Cooperative Councils' Innovation Network June 2025

Social Value Toolkit

Supporting Narrative

Contents

Cooperative Councils' Innovation Network

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CCIN Social Value Toolkit – Supporting Narrative

Why CCIN member councils need a broader perspective on social value

In joining the CCIN, councils are signalling a desire to work with citizens, to redirect flows of wealth back into communities, build resilient local supply chains, develop genuine partnerships with their communities, increase economic agency through the growth of cooperatives and social enterprises, and give citizens agency over the things that are important in their lives.

Many are attempting to do this through progressive procurement policies and the use of social value measurement frameworks. However, the positive results have so far been relatively shallow and piecemeal, despite significant effort and resource going into this agenda.

The CCIN Member Pack states that:

> *"Our work recognises the need to define a new model for local government built on civic leadership, with councils working in equal partnership with local people to shape and strengthen communities; replacing traditional models of top-down governance and service delivery with local leadership, genuine cooperation, and built on the founding traditions of the cooperative movement: collective action, cooperation, empowerment, and enterprise."* [1]

Implicit in this is a recognition that giving people and communities greater power to define and contribute to their own flourishing will unlock significant 'value'. However, the precise form that this value will take is often difficult, if not impossible, to fully know in advance. It emerges through a 'democratic' process.

This presents a challenge to many of our existing models of social value, where decisions tend to be based on a forecast of transactional outputs rather than a deeper interrogation of how and whether we're setting the right conditions for benefits to be generated by, and with, those who might experience them.

As argued by Joe Guinan and Martin O'Neill in The Case for Community Wealth Building, local authorities need to move beyond a simple market management mindset to achieve these goals:

> *"[A Local Authority should] see its central mission, not only to deliver certain services at an efficient cost with the resources at its disposal, but also more broadly as helping to construct the social and economic landscape in which people live"* [2].

A way forward is highlighted by Anthony Collins Solicitors in a recent briefing on cooperation in local government:

> *"Transformation requires a conscious decision by the public sector to do more than look at "alternative provider models" whilst continuing to engage with them through market mechanisms, focussed on measures of private benefit with some 'social value' added to the mix. It involves identifying a different way for the public sector (which itself operates for public benefit and not private gain) to engage and work with organisations which themselves have a different nature and purpose, whether that is for a public, charitable or social purpose. Adversarial and binary arrangements like contracts struggle to meet this need."* [3]

This report explores how and why this commercial mindset has come to underpin local government processes and the limits this puts on what feels possible.

It builds in three parts. Part one traces how we got to this point, and advises how to effectively deliver social value in genuinely competitive markets. Part two offers a broader 'theory of value' which can unlock different commissioning approaches, highlighting the positive impact this is already having through a number of case studies. Part three looks at what councils and the CCIN can do about this, proposing mindset changes and meaningful, achievable steps to bring this into mainstream practice.

A note on tools and toolkits:

20th century social critic Ivan Illich identified a crucial distinction between the way that new technologies (tools) can be used:

"(Tools) can be used in at least two opposite ways. The first leads to specialization of functions, institutionalization of values and centralization of power, and turns

1 https://www.councils.coop/publication/members-pack

2 The Case for Community Wealth Building - Joe Guinan, Martin O'Neill (2019)

3 https://ica.coop/sites/default/files/2024-05/briefing_note_3_local_government.pdf

people into accessories of bureaucracies or machines. The second enlarges the range of each person's competence, control, initiative. [4]"

Illich showed that the first use-type has an inbuilt tendency to generate more of the problem it was designed to solve, creating an ever-expanding dependency which he terms a 'radical monopoly'. The second category creates the generative conditions for engaging people's innate capacities and intrinsic desire to contribute to human flourishing. Illich called the latter Tools for Conviviality.

The toolkit attempts to escape from a radical monopoly of Social Value practice which requires ever increasing compliance resources, and ever more arcane knowledge to satisfy its own internal logic.

It attempts to show local authorities how to approach the tools of procurement and commissioning as convivial tools, supporting those who use them and helping to create the conditions for growing real and relevant social value in communities. In many councils this may need a significant shift of approach and mindset but it does not need new legislation or additional resources. It shows how to use procurement and commissioning tools in a way which re-engages the creativity and professional judgement of public servants, harnesses the appetite of cooperatives, VCSEs and SMEs to work with and contribute to local areas, and expands the range of possibilities for how councils can commission services.

It is not a recipe book. To treat it in this way would risk staying rooted in Illich's first category. It seeks to offer a map of the territory and a compass to help councillors and local government officers navigate their way through their options and come up with an appropriate and imaginative response to a situation that delivers authentic policy-aligned, locally-relevant social value.

Part 1 – Competition and Social Value >

4 Tools for Conviviality - Ivan Illich (1973)

Part 1 – Competition and Social Value

The origins, limitations, and opportunities for delivering Social Value through competitive procurement processes

Sandra Hamilton's research traces the history of public procurement policy over 200 years and finds that the last 40 years represent the anomaly. As far back as 1843 evidence exists of governments leveraging procurement to improve social outcomes by establishing exemplary working conditions that raised standards on public contracts beyond legal compliance [5].

Social, economic and environmental concerns have always been central to the public procurement of goods and services and our understanding of what constitutes 'Public Value'. However, in the mid 1980's the onset of privatisation that was spurred by compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) embedded a culture of lowest price on the basis of fear of challenge.

This process went hand in hand with the introduction of New Public Management discipline which started in the 1980s and accelerated through the post-cold war, 'triumph of liberalism' period of the 1990s. The driver for the widespread adoption of NMP practices was a crisis in public finances driven by the debt crisis and recession of the late 1970s, and the approach sought to improve the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of public services through greatly expanding the role of markets, management principles and measurement [6].

A major thrust of the New Public Management paradigm was to neutralise professional judgement by introducing objective, neutral, measurable processes. Services would be outsourced via contracts, tendered on an open market, with contracts awarded to the most economically advantageous tender. The professionalisation of public procurement discipline was developed in this period and draws heavily on this mindset.

As competitive tendering became increasingly seen as the only way to ensure value for money public services, a competition-focussed procurement paradigm has extended its reach far beyond simple market purchasing of goods or works into the commissioning of complex public services.

Amongst councils responsible for delivering social services, 75% of budgets are now spent on the delivery of adult and children's social services7, "using procurement processes that are not fit for purpose", according to Sandra Hamilton, who's research argues for the need to distinguish competitive market purchasing from the system stewardship needed to design and deliver social services.

As extensively demonstrated elsewhere [8] this has led to a situation in which the markets for the provision of public goods and services have been increasingly captured by a small number of companies who are primarily motivated by the profit opportunity this presents.

In a self-reinforcing circuit, public authorities have adopted mindsets and purchasing processes premised on the assumption of profit motivated partners who need to be controlled through tightly prescribed contracts and Service Level Agreements. Without deliberate intervention, these processes remain largely blind to deeper expressions of public and social value, helping to bring about a reality in which the only apparently suitable provision becomes profit-motivated partners.

The widespread adoption of these approaches has also had a direct bearing on the level of agency that people operating within the system feel able to exercise, and how they understand their responsibilities within the system. Interviews and research confirmed that these kinds of bureaucracy have disempowered council officers and provider staff, and undermined council officers' ability to apply professional judgement or provide coherent holistic support for residents.

One striking example encountered concerned a person attending an Advice Centre regarding an issue with their Universal Credit who handed a staff member a note saying that they were experiencing domestic violence. However, because the Advice Centre did not have a pre-existing process, or a culture which gave staff the discretion to act beyond their Service Level Agreement, the Advisor simply dealt with the Universal Credit issue and took no further action, sending the person away. The council in question has recognised that in order to transcend the straitjacket that NPM approaches have

5 https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/206477454/UoM_CPOIB_FINAL_Price_Taker_or_Market_Shaper_Oct_19th_2021.pdf

6 https://www.themj.co.uk/social-prosperity-ahead

7 https://www.cipfa.org/about-cipfa/press-office/latest-press-releases/cipfa-study-identifies-solutions-to-englands-crumbling-social-care-sector#:~:text=CIPFA%20finds%20that%20only%2025,social%20care%20in%202022%2F23

8 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/sites/bartlett/files/2024.10.04_iipp_camdenreport_pr_2024.06.pdf

imposed, it is necessary to rethink its services at a system level, working across service silos, and thinking beyond output-driven Service Level Agreements [9].

Theory of Competition

At the heart of competitive procurement processes are a set of commercial **assumptions**. We can refer to this as a **theory of competition** [10].

It is assumed that:

- The interests of the purchaser and the potential providers are fundamentally pulling in different directions
- The purchaser wants to extract the maximum value from the potential providers at the lowest cost.
- The providers are motivated to deliver this value because of the profit opportunity that would come from winning the tender.
- The prospect of winning the contract over others who could do so too exerts a downward pressure on the cost at which providers are willing to offer their services
- This allows the purchaser to identify the optimum balance between cost, fair profit, and efficiency.
- The purchaser therefore has the greatest leverage to extract 'value' from the relationship before a contract has been signed.

In many cases this may be an effective way to deliver value, but it follows that certain conditions need to be true:

- The purchaser needs to have a very clear understanding of the value sought prior to tender.
- That value needs to be describable in terms clear enough to hold the provider to account later.
- There needs to be a functioning competitive 'market' for the goods or services being purchased, with a number of providers offering the same 'product' and competing to offer the best price.
- The product that the purchaser wants/needs already exists in the form that they want it.
- The contract itself, and the contract management capabilities of the purchaser, need to be robust enough to hold the supplier to account for the delivery of the value promised

All of this makes contracts and commercial approaches useful when the contracting authority is well-resourced, when the parties' interests are not aligned, and where there is a simple, predictable relationship between inputs and outputs.

The Dominant Model for Social Value in Local government

Much of the current approach to social value in local government emerged in response to the Social Value Act of 2012. This provided an invitation to local authorities to take a more holistic view of what would be valuable in any given context.

Specifically, it required that prior to commencing a procurement of services, any contracting authority must consider—

- how **what is proposed to be procured** might improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the relevant area, and
- how, **in conducting the process of procurement**, it might act with a view to securing that improvement."

And should include:

> "only matters that are **relevant to what is proposed to be procured** and, in doing so, must consider the extent to which it is proportionate in all the circumstances to take those matters into account."

The Social Value Act was therefore asking public authorities to consider context-relevant social value as a core concern of the contract and *not* an additional unrelated wishlist.

However, the assumption that neutral, apolitical competitive commercial processes and contracts are the best way to deliver value runs deep, and in most cases local authorities' interpretation of the intent of the Social Value Act was 'bolted on' to the commercial, competition logic of the new public management paradigm. It builds from a starting assumption that it is not in the interests of the provider to offer something socially valuable – it needs to be *extracted* from the unwilling provider through the incentive of future profits.

Many local authorities now require that at least 10% of the award criteria in a procurement are based on the *additional* social value that a provider offers. This is most often interpreted as social value which is separate and unrelated to the core deliverables of the contract, which may or may not already include things which are inherently socially valuable [11].

9 Interviews

10 Author's own analysis

11 In the case of a contract for the provision of social services, the entire contract is about delivering something of social value – the social value is inherent.

The most widespread practice has been to implement social value policies which standardise the way that this 'additional' social value is accounted for in the assessment of different tenders. This is done through the use of social value 'menus' such as the National TOMs framework, or a local variant.

This has a number of apparent benefits, including: making implementation easier by offering an off-the shelf, one-size fits all solution that interfaces with existing processes; treating all suppliers equally; removing the need for applied professional judgement by providing a mathematical model of comparable financial proxies; and providing robust comparator data across the sector.

However, this appeal conceals a number of significant issues for pursuing the kinds of social value that CCIN members are concerned with.

Scoring social value as additional and indirectly related to the core contract, under a standardised measurement framework...

... surrenders decisions to a set questionable financial proxies and is open to gaming:

> *"having worked in this field for 16 years, what I have realized is a this very much leads to points chasing by contractors. They will focus their efforts on those areas that they get the most value out of, but that isn't necessarily in line with the priorities that we as a council want to push them towards"*

Interviews - Local Authority Procurement Manager

... doesn't capture the impact an intervention has at the subjective level:

> *"I don't think TOMs even measures the impact on the people and the communities. It's very much "so how many events did you deliver? How many hours staff time was that? and have you met your proxy value?" That's the kind of measurement and it's not then from that event how many people from the local community attended and "what was the impact on them?"*

Interviews – Public Service Social Enterprise Leader

... treats social value as a set of static outputs rather than an emergent process:

> *"because [our project to take over a community asset is] community-led we also know that other things might come up that we can't quite put our finger on but the social value of it being community-led comes in generating ideas that we can't even predict right now"*

Interviews – Community Organiser

... doesn't meet the legal requirement to be relevant to the subject matter of the contract:

> *"[TOMs] could be used in a way that is relevant to the subject matter of contract with the contracting authority selecting the measures that relate closely to their corporate plan and then adapting the contract specification to enable broad outcomes. In practice, however, they often are not used in that way with authorities adopting the shopping list approach and leaving it to suppliers to decide what they are going to offer. This is plainly likely to result in outcomes that are too remote and therefore in breach of the Social Value Act, and now the Procurement Act 2023."*

Working Group, Public Procurement Lawyer

... makes social value feel irrelevant to the contract/ project manager:

> *"[Making sense of social value accounting models] is difficult and when contract managers are busy managing a contract which is to do with their specialism and having to address social value, which is not in their comfort zone, [when the] contract is in difficulty, social value is the first thing to be to be dropped."*

Interviews - Local Authority Procurement Manager

... doesn't distinguish between things which are genuinely additional, and things which would have happened anyway:

> *"The hidden irony of using frameworks like the TOMs is the cost required for service providers to procurements to service the requirements of the frameworks and the misguided application of individual TOMS to procurements. Let's break that down; the cost to private sector suppliers runs into millions of pounds in human resource alone, most procurements will include training and apprenticeships as a KPI in Social value delivery - commissioners should know that the private sector already embraces and invests heavily in training the next generation - talented people are the lifeblood of any organisation so, by all means measure it but don't make it a mandatory KPI - you are simply rewarding services providers for something they would be doing anyway."*

Working Group Discussions - Former Social Value Director of a Global Construction Company

Local authorities are pursuing social value to improve social outcomes and change lives, but have become locked-in to a narrow definition of social value that doesn't seem to work to the ends they might want. The response to this is often to double down and increase

the level of dedicated internal resources to manage compliance within these systems. Many local authorities are caught in the trap of this 'radical monopoly'.

It important to note that the understanding of social value as 'additional' is in direct contrast to social value best practice in central government where the MACS model requires public officials to make a qualitative, context specific interrogation of the social and environmental potential of the intervention, and develop an assessment of social value against these specified aims [12].

Optimising Procurement Processes for Social Value in Market Purchasing Contexts

Hamilton's research introduces a useful distinction between Market Purchasing and Commissioning in Complex Systems. Market purchasing involves scenarios where numerous equivalent products exist and different suppliers compete to offer these products at the best price and/or quality. This might include, for example, professional services, road surfacing, buying printers, construction works and so on. These can all be delivered in more, or less, socially, economically, and environmentally valuable ways [13].

Under these competitive market conditions, many of the issues identified can be addressed through the procurement cycle by being more deliberate and directional about the type of social value sought and how that value is assessed in its context. Rather the treating the social value as an additional benefit on top of the core contract, the purchasing authority should make its own determination (in discussion with market and community of need where appropriate) of what is relevant and proportionate social value in each case and make that a requirement of the contract. Corporate Policy goals or missions can be interrogated to provide this direction.

There isn't and shouldn't be a one size fits all answer to the question of what is relevant. It's a matter of professional judgement and requires a level of market knowledge and the application of some common sense:

> *"if you're asking a two-man band consultancy about, you know, carbon emissions and things like that, it's just not the right contract to be focusing that on. So, we try and focus our efforts on those aspects that are of most relevance to the contractor."*
>
> Interview - Local Authority Procurement Manager

This allows committed providers the space to demonstrate their understanding of the needs and respond with a genuine offer. This will be much easier to answer for an organisation who has a genuine commitment to the social value that the council hopes will be realised.

> *"I think with some of the local authorities as well where you're talking about measuring the impact on the wider community, the ones where we can do that much better are the ones that don't use TOMs. [It's] more helpful where there is obviously a question on social value, but you've got freedom within that to really put together an offer for that service in that contract."*
>
> Interviews - Public Service Provider

How to build social value into a commercial contract

Given the limited directionality offered by social value menus, and the requirement to make social value relevant and proportionate to the subject matter of the contract, there are a number of things that local authorities should do when attempting to drive social value through a competitive procurement process.

1. Establish a clear policy basis for the social, economic, and environmental value that is sought
2. Test these intentions with target audience (service recipients, impacted community) and ensure the value opportunity is aligned
3. Test and assess (through pre-market dialogue) what the market can/could offer in light of the policy goals
4. Engage with social enterprises, cooperatives or SMEs – can they deliver any/all of the thing you want?
5. Co-design the specification with the end user.
6. Identify social value objectives that are relevant to the purchasing domain and proportionate to the scale of the contract.

12 https://www.stoneking.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/Sandra%20Hamilton%20-%20Final%20DRAFT%20V1%20LGA%20Letter%20-The%20Role%20of%20the%20VCSE%20Sector%20-%202024%20Social%20Value%20Conference.pdf

13 To illustrate with an extreme example, there are very clear and obvious qualitative and quantitative differences between the economic and social value generated by a £100m contract through an organisation where the ratio between lowest paid worker and highest paid worker is 1:7 (e.g. Mondragon Corporation), versus an organisation where wages are suppressed and all profits from the contract are extracted from the business as shareholder buybacks.

7. Be intentional and directional - when specifying the contract, be as clear as possible about the social/ environmental impact sought – don't leave it to the market to define what's valuable.
8. Make this *part of the core contract specification*, rather than an additional, optional bolt-on
9. Break contract into lots and consider simplifying bid criteria, where there is an identified opportunity for VCSEs, SMEs, Cooperatives to bid.
10. Include end users in the assessment process.
11. Monitor delivery of social value clauses alongside other contract deliverables – this should be more straightforward for contract managers if the value is relevant and directly related to the subject matter of the contract

There are a number of tools which can help achieve these ends at different stages through a competitive process.

Tool	Purpose	Example
Social Value Rationale	For procurers and commissioners to think through social value opportunity at the very beginning of the process. It serves both as a prompt and as a record of the thinking	Social Value Rationale template (Birmingham)
Supplier charters	A set of commitments suppliers are asked to commit to when bidding for contracts. Requirements are tailored according to the contract's nature, value and duration.	Westminster Supplier Charter
Supplier directories	Identifying and engaging suppliers/providers to bid for contracts	Local Directory (Find it in Birmingham)
Social Enterprise directories	Identifying VCSEs who could be invited to bid for contracts	Social Provider Directory (Supply Change)
Social Value brokerage	People and/or online platforms that can help local authorities signpost suppliers to community needs	matchmyproject.org (online SV Brokerage) osep.org.uk (Local SV brokerage network example)
Measurement Frameworks	Support suppliers and projects to track and articulate their impact. Recommend using frameworks based on personal wellbeing e.g. Measureup and the Social Value Engine	measure-up.org socialvalueengine.com

Limits of Competition

Whilst these approaches work effectively in many situations there are several further issues that can, and do, arise under competitive conditions[14]:

- An apparently 'neutral' procurement process may contain hidden biases which remove/reduce objectivity from the decision, favouring status quo provision over innovation or new entrants[15].
- In complex social contexts where value streams are inherently unpredictable, it can be difficult and counterproductive to try to pin down a set of social value output deliverables[16].
- By setting the terms of what is valuable, the purchasing authority may be closing down the possibility of other definitions of value e.g. those of the impacted community, users of the service, etc.

14 Interviews
15 Interviews
16 https://www.humanlearning.systems/overview

- When interests are genuinely divergent, any power asymmetry towards the provider can make it difficult for local authorities to include and enforce market-shaping conditions within their contracts.
  - By extension, contracts founded on divergent interests require well-resourced legal and contract management functions to enforce delivery.
- The starting assumptions of divergent interests and process neutrality can obscure and undervalue any genuine alignments of interests between potential provider and purchaser

Legal Principles enabling directionality in competitive procurement

There are a number of fundamental legal principles which govern the expenditure of public authorities:

- objectivity – having a clear and defensible basis for choosing one course of action over another
- transparency – information about intention and process must be clear, accurate, and accessible to all
- Non-discrimination – ensuring that everyone who could have provided the specific services required is given the same opportunity to provide them
- Integrity – acting on what you said you'd do
- Value for money – a balanced judgement about finding the best way to use public resources to deliver policy objectives.[17]

It is essential to appreciate that although these principles apply to the process of procurement, they are not and were never intended to constrain the fundamental question of what should be funded or purchased in the first place – this requires a value-informed judgement based on the best available information.

If, following an assessment of policy aims, user/community needs, market conditions, and available resources, a local authority has sound justification for pursuing a particular course of action, there is no legal reason why this can't be specified in a contract or invitation to tender.

Legal Framework for Social Value in Procurement and how to interpret the Procurement Act 2023

Alternative pathways

> *"To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail..." Anon*

The NPM-influenced mindset has created an overreliance on procurement as the only method for delivering value. However, it is not inevitable that the desired outcomes will be best achieved through a competitive process.

In the words of Public Benefit Lawyer, Julian Blake:

> *"The precise legal obligation in relation to public services is not under procurement law, it is the Duty of Best Value: "to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which [a public authority's] functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficient and effectiveness" and "to consult representatives of persons who use or are likely to use [the] services" (Section 3 Local Government Act 1999)."18*

There are a wide range of commissioning activities which can help achieve these aims including:

> *"consultative community and supplier engagement; grants and preferential loans; purpose-driven investment and co-investment; community and community resource mobilisation, including through asset transfer; purpose-driven community partnerships; and procured service contracts."*
>
> *"The commissioning authority will need to engage in and/or support, enquiry, research and development, experimentation, pilot projects, market shaping and development, accepting uncertainty, risk and failure as a necessary part and a learning part of the process.*
>
> *The starting point for meeting a social need [should] never [be] a standard invitation to tender, based on pre-existing assumptions."*

We therefore need to be careful assuming that procurement is the right and only way to deliver social value. To achieve the transformative system change that the CCIN aspires to, and to mobilise the resources and energies of communities, we recommend taking a broader perspective on value than the theory of competition allows...

17 Peter Kunzlik, Neoliberalism and the European Public Procurement Regime, Cambridge Yearbook of Legal Studies, 2022, states that "in the public procurement context, 'value for money' is a complex, multi-faceted and value-driven concept that does not equate to neoliberal notions of 'efficiency'"

18 https://e3m.org.uk/commissioning-shapes-local-ecosystems-corrective-1

Part 2 – A transformative social value lens for CCIN councils – the relational nature of value

The CCIN follows a set of values and principles drawn from the cooperative movement: **self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarit**y. In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. These all stress the importance of being in the right type of relationship – to self, to one another, and to the wider community, and are based on an implicit and shared sense of the common good.

Underpinning this, scholar of the commons, David Bollier, offers a universal theory of value, which opens up new possibilities in how CCIN councils could approach social value in commissioning. Drawing on insights from the science of complex systems he states:

"This theory sees (all) value arising from relationships. Value does not inhere in objects; it emerges through a process as living entities – whether human beings or the flora and fauna of ecosystems – interact with each other. In this sense, value is not fixed and static, but something that emerges naturally as living entities interact"[19]

This provides a very different way of understanding social value, where 'value' is not something located in things or people, but is created through **positive collaborations** between people and between people and things. We can refer to this as a **Theory of Collaboration**[20].

It follows that:

- the fundamental pre-condition for creating any value is the **existence of a relationship**
- The **quality of that relationship** determines whether the value that emerges will be positive (generative) or negative (degenerative)
- There is **contagion, and emergence** in these system relationships – i.e. positive relationships self-perpetuate by creating the conditions for more positive relationships to emerge.
- Therefore, if we are looking to generate lasting and generative value then **creating the conditions for the right kinds of relationships should be the first concern**.

Looking at value through this lens we can start to see why, despite significant investment on the part of local authorities and many suppliers, the social value agenda is not yet delivering on its transformative potential. The predominant ***competition*** **theory of value** and the commercial atmosphere surrounding procurement have created a culture in which subjectivity and relationality are actively discouraged in processes and assessments of value. By attempting to remain neutral and objective we risk embedding conditions which work directly against this relational flourishing, and erode social capital, trust and accountability across the system.

The objectivity principle has become narrowly equated to 'expressing no value judgement' rather than an invitation to come to an objectively informed position on what is most likely to support the generation of value in a given relational context.

There's a growing movement of reformers recognising the fundamental importance of relationality in public service provision. They emphasise the importance of coproduction, democratic engagement, human-centric provision, and direct participation in identifying the right value to pursue, and setting the right conditions for value to emerge[21].

It is evident that we may need to approach value creation differently to create the conditions for positive relationships to emerge. It calls for a shift in the mindset of Public Officials; from managers of scarce resources, to stewards of place, embedded in complex and inherently unpredictable social ecosystems[22].

Importantly, given the competition paradigm's continued hold over our notion of value for money, research is increasingly showing that paying proper attention to system conditions, relational working, and seeking to leverage the strengths and contributions of a wider range of collaborators may be the only way to reliably increase productivity in complex social systems[23].

Put another way, **we may only be able to achieve better *value for money* in the provision of complex public services, if we start addressing the conditions needed to create more generative relationships**.

19 https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/re-imagining-value-report.pdf

20 Authors' own analysis

21 see for example https://www.humanlearning.systems/overview/, https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/projects/do-with

22 https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/System%20Stewardship.pdf

23 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/The-Motivational-State_2024_Nov.pdf

An alternative approach to commissioning for social value – Collaboration Pathways

As shown in recent guidance from the LGA24, effective collaboration in complex systems depends on developing a shared vision based on clear system goals, identifying and recognising the potential strengths and contributions of different partners and stakeholders, and a partner selection process that can identify and test for this alignment of vision and purpose. It calls for flexible, transparent governance and accounting structures that can steward that vision, fairly allocating risk and reward, whilst innovating, experimenting and adapting to changing circumstances, incentives and opportunities.

Conventional procurement tools and supplier selection processes might be a useful part of this process but they should be considered alongside other commissioning tools such as subsidy, grants and preferential loans, supplier and community engagement, community mobilisation, asset transfer, and community partnerships[25].

To support the selection of partners, we need to move away from the 'added value' concept of social value, that focusses on outputs, to an assessment of **Social Value Imperatives**[26]. This means identifying (through dialogue with communities and service users) and testing for (through the assessment process) the important relational qualities which can be expected to lead to successful collaboration.

Importantly for CCIN members, by putting an emphasis on creating purpose-aligned relationships and choosing processes and assessment approaches which can truly test this, councils are much more likely to find natural partners with organisations which operate for the 'common good' (VCSEs, community groups, and cooperatives) than they would through 'value-blind' processes.

The legal flexibilities supporting collaboration in procurement and commissioning

The Procurement Act 2023 introduces a statutory principle of "Public Benefit" (subject to necessary resources and value for money) but does not define how this should be understood in a particular context. As with Best Value, it is within the gift of a contracting authority to come to an objective position on what public benefit means within any given context and pursue a process which best achieves that aim on an ongoing basis.

It needs to start with recognition that in complex social systems, where there may be less clarity on the outputs required, we can still come to an objectively informed judgement on the right partners and the optimum form that a collaboration might take.

This calls for proper interrogation of a different set of questions.

- What is the social need or opportunity that could be addressed?
- What are all the available skills/resources/capabilities?
- What are the commissioning tools which could be used to support/steward this
- What are the 'imperatives' that would make partners suitable for the provision of (elements of) the service?
- What legal form would best steward the ongoing delivery of public/social benefit?

Provided there is a well evidenced interrogation of these questions, and a clear thread from policy goal through to process design and the selection of partners, there is no legal reason why these processes cannot be followed.[27]

24 https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Purposeful%20collaboration%20report.pdf

25 https://e3m.org.uk/commissioning-shapes-local-ecosystems-corrective-1/

26 https://e3m.org.uk/social-value-imperatives/

27 https://e3m.org.uk/from-procurement-to-partnership-a-practical-toolkit-for-commissioners/

Collaborative commissioning – tools and pathways

There are a number of commissioning tools and pathways which should be considered prior to starting a standard procurement processes.[28]

Tool/Resource	Purpose	Example
Social Value Imperatives	Setting the pre-conditions for participation	e3m.org.uk/social-value-imperatives
Grants	Where services are being provided at cost without an expectation of profit, it may be more efficient and effective to use grants rather than contracts and procurement processes	gov.uk/government/publications/grants-standards/guidance-for-general-grants-html
Direct award contracts or grants	Where no competitive market exists (where only a single specific provider can provide the goods or services required) local authorities can direct award contracts or grants	gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-act-2023-guidance-documents-define-phase/direct-award-html
Alliance contract	Where different parties share the same goals, alliance contracts can provide a shared risk/reward vehicle to enable joint working towards these goals. Alliance contracts typically devolve control of the budget to the Alliance based on a set of mutually agreed principles and working practices.	e3m.org.uk/plymouth-alliance-contract-supporting-people-with-complex-needs
Relational contract	A relational contract focusses on the required relational qualities and behaviours (rather than outputs). It can be a more effective agreement than a commercial contract (which primarily seeks to protect the interests of either party) when the goals of partners are aligned.	golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/the-basics/relational-contracting
Collaboration Agreement	Another less prescriptive legal document outlining the relational principles on which a collaboration will work.	contractlogix.com/contract-management/collaboration-agreement
Thin layer cooperative	An open and iterative governance structure that can crowd in the contribution of different partners, 'neutralise' divergent interests, and enable iterative working towards shared goals.	cni.coop innovation.coop
Public Commons Partnership	A joint venture between public authority and an organised community which gives community direct control of the assets and/or resources which impact their lives.	in-abundance.org/what-is-a-public-commons-parntership
Community Land Trust	Non-profit corporation that holds land on behalf of a place-based community, while serving as the long-term steward	communitylandtrusts.org.uk/about-clts/what-is-a-community-land-trust-clt

28 Local authorities should seek further legal advice on the use of these tools and procedures

Competitive Flexible procedure	A newly introduced PA23 procurement process which can be tailored to the requirements of the commissioner. This can be used to simplify bidding processes for smaller entities, and/or to run staged processes of discovery, design, and dialogue to enable co-design of services and contract specifications.	https://www.brownejacobson.com/insights/procurement-bill-competitive-flexible-procedure
Light touch regime	A procurement pathway which can be used for the procurement of socio-cultural services. The LTR allows greater procedural flexibility than an open procurement.	gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-act-2023-guidance-documents-plan-phase/guidance-light-touch-contracts-html
Innovation Partnership	A staged process combining research, innovation and procurement, often involving the sharing of resulting intellectual property. Can be used for co-developing new forms of public service provision and provides a structured process for risk and reward sharing.	single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/GROW_C2_innovation_partnership_210901.pdf
Joint Venture	Under the general power of competence, a local authority has the power to create joint ventures. A joint venture in local government is a partnership between a public sector agency and a private, third sector, or commons organization (see public commons partnerships), or an individual. The purpose of a joint venture is to share resources, expertise, and capital to achieve a common goal.	netzerogo.org.uk/s/topic/0TO8d000000oXq2GAE/joint-venture?tabset-804e0=1

Understanding impact in complex systems

In complex social systems defining, navigating and understanding how and where value is being generated needs a different approach to setting then and monitoring progress against narrow KPIs. Some useful tools and approaches are highlighted below:

Tool/Resource	Purpose	Example
Cornerstone Indicators	Defining and monitoring complex emergent value within a community	cornerstoneindicators.com
Sensemaker	Mixes qualitative and quantitative approaches to find patterns, identifying unarticulated needs, and developing new insights into systems	thecynefin.co/get-sensemaker
Ripple Effect Mapping	An established method for monitoring emergent value over the lifetime of an activity	wavehill.com/single-post/causing-a-ripple-in-evaluation-how-ripple-effect-mapping-can-provide-new-insights
Human Learning Systems	An alternative approach to public management which embraces the complexity of the real world, and enables us to work effectively in that complexity	humanlearning.systems/methods

Collaboration Case Studies

A wide range of examples have been discussed in the production of the report. Although the examples were from very different contexts, there are some key features which distinguish them as relational, collaborative approaches. They all...

- started with a recognition that something needed to change
- recognised the system as was complex and interconnected
- recognised the central importance of establishing different relationships
- recognised the importance of exploring wide range of perspectives
- allowed different actors to work from, and contribute based-on, their strengths
- enabled a dynamic interaction of different parts of the system towards common good goals
- innovated and adapted to new opportunities
- stewarded the vision through shared governance
- leveraged a wider range of resources

The examples demonstrate how councils and other public authorities are already putting these principles into action:

Wigan Ethical Homecare Framework – setting the right system conditions through relational 'imperatives'

Read how Wigan identified and embedded a set of social value imperatives into the commissioning of Home Support services, to build a resilient and collaborative care system, that generates extensive economic, social and environmental value for the borough.

CNI Broadband Infrastructure Cooperative – neutralising corporate self-interest through cooperative governance

Read how Thameside Council and local digital technology specialists, have used cooperative governance to create a thriving collaboration of public, and private organisations to accelerate the rollout of affordable fibre broadband infrastructure.

Leicestershire Children's Services Innovation Partnership

Read how Leicestershire Council have used the Innovation Partership Procedure to co-design and deliver services with external expertise and input from services users, generating significant and unanticipated financial investment in their first year of operation.

Plymouth Alliance – using an alliance contract to develop a human learning system

Read how Plymouth Council works with the local provider ecosystem and social impact funders through an alliance contract to create a collaborative system where partners work towards the shared purpose around the needs of individuals.

Hackney Antiracist Commissioning

Read how Hackney are developing collaborative commissioning principles to make their community grants programme more representative of local communities and more responsive to their strengths and aspirations.

Oxford City Council - Growing the Social Economy through collaboration not competition via grant funding

Read how Oxford City Council direct awarded grant funding to a collaboration of local partners to codevelop a set of actions which would further the strategic aims of growing the social economy.

MOPAC Alliance Commissioning

Hear how the Ideas Alliance supported the Mayor's Office for Police and Crime Commissioning (MOPAC) to co-develop a service specification with young people and potential service providers. The service supports young people impacted by violence, and is managed through an alliance contract. Providers were selected through a procurement process which assessed them against the essential qualities and outcomes identified by young people and providers in the co-development process

Manchester Regeneration Frameworks

Read how Manchester City Council have driven long term impact through regeneration partnerships and bespoke, area-based social value frameworks

In all cases the results have been enormously generative, setting in process expanding virtuous cycles which increased the levels of connectedness across the system, improved relationships and working practices, and delivered real world outcomes for people, as well as creating the more obviously measurable social value 'outputs' we're used to tracking. Value was generated in both expected and unexpected ways.

By testing for and selecting partners who were genuinely motivated by the objectives rather than the profit-opportunity, or by finding mechanisms to put self-interest in service of the common good, and allowing for experimentation and ongoing dialogue, it was possible to 'crowd in' a much wider range of resources (financial, intellectual, human, social) than would otherwise be possible.

Comparing Competition and Collaboration

This report and the accompanying toolkit maps the wider territory of commissioning. It does not prescribe answers. The following table provides a compass for officers and councillors to understand the territory they find themselves in and the things to look for.

	Competition models	Collaboration models
Motivating when...	Interests of parties diverge	Interests of parties converge
Delivers value through...	Clear specification	Emergent, ongoing, goal-aligned iterative process
Tightly specified Social Value requirements can...	Discipline market behaviour	Obscure deeper engagement with shared goals
Test suitability through...	Track record, tender commitments, cost	Capability, values and purpose alignment, transparency and/or open book accounting
Incentivises through...	Winner takes all competition	Working to common purpose
Value for money assured by...	Competitive tension/profit incentive	Transparency of costs/profit across partners, shared interest in financial sustainability
Use when...	Seeking clearly defined, static value in market purchasing	Seeking emergent, uncertain value streams
Public authority is...	Market manager	System steward and/or convener
Value is...	Zero sum	Generative

Part 3 – Where to start?

Setting Enabling Policy frameworks

Working towards these principles is made more possible where councils have policy and strategy frameworks which place value on 'the common good', recognise the need to activate communities and and support a wider set of methods and tools for achieving this (e.g. self-help, sharing responsibility, the value of the commons, the economic and social cooperation, etc.) whilst accepting the reality that the delivery of systemic change is complex, uncertain.

This makes it more possible to create the golden thread from policy goal (or mission) through to an appropriate and relational position on what constitutes 'Best Value' in a given instance.

To enable effective **relational collaboration**, policy frameworks may should explicitly recognise:

- the value of coproduction and relational working
- The complexity and inherent unpredictability of human systems
- he importance of subsidiarity, and democratic processes for defining value, developing social capital, and generating agency

Local government is beginning to take this seriously as demonstrated by the following expansive policy frameworks

- We Make Camden
- Our Greenwich
- Doughnut Economics Framework for Oxfordshire

These strategies don't prescribe answers or propose concrete programmes of deliverables. Instead, they offer a significant steer to think creatively about how resources (internal and external) can be mobilised towards shared goals. Crucially they are underpinned long-term metrics which can be monitored to assess ongoing progress against these goals.

From this vantage point, the Local Authority's horizons of what might constitute 'Best Value' or 'Public Benefit' is significantly and concretely extended.

Mindsets and Culture

It is essential to see that Public Benefit and Best Value are flexible, value-loaded concepts and therefore provide a permissive legal framework to support decision making in the service of locally defined goals – whether those goals are defined by a local authority or a community of need.

Regulations should not be a barrier to achieving innovation or leveraging council spend as a strategic lever, provided local policy frameworks provide sufficient directionality on the objectives and recognise the broad spectrum of tools and approaches which may be needed to achieve them.

As highlighted in the Camden-IPPR report on mission-led procurement[29], questions of relative value require judgement of an inherently political nature and shouldn't be subservient to operationalised systems of value.

The Camden report identifies a number of perspective shifts which can support the approaches described above.

- Neutral to intentional
- Risk to Uncertainty
- Transactional to Relational
- Risk Management to Risk Leadership

The movement for relational public services, recommends a further mindset shift from:

- 'Do to' to 'Do With'

This is the subject of a toolkit from the New Citizen Project which offers a framework to bring about this culture shift in councils[30]

Skills and people

As mentioned earlier, local authorities are investing significant energies and resources into Social Value compliance and monitoring systems. One alternative would be to reprofile some of this resource, creating roles charged with working horizontally across system silos to stimulate generative, collaborative partnerships towards the wider system goals. One example of this is Camden creating Mission Leads to work across the different parts of the council to achieve cross cutting goals.

29 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/sites/bartlett_public_purpose/files/2024.10.04_iipp_camdenreport_pr_2024.06.pdf

30 https/www.newcitizenproject.com/council-culture

The existence of these roles can help local authorities to be more actively propositional and conditional with their planned expenditure and the use of their assets. Rather than passively waiting for a market to provide solutions they could actively identify opportunities to initiate challenges, innovation partnerships, public service community partnerships, and joint venture public commons partnerships, crowding in resources and energy from diverse range of potential partners around current and future challenges.

Local authorities can draw inspiration from experiments in Europe which are intentionally pursuing a different role for state officials such as the Regulation of the Urban Commons in Bolonga, and Barca en Comu[31].

Assuring efficiency and effectiveness remains a central requirement of public services under Best Value. This might appear difficult to achieve if we're approaching value and service design from this complexity mindset. Will it be possible to offer the same assurance that we are doing the right thing if we're less clear what the outputs are going to be?...

In answering that question, it is important to recognise that there is already inherent uncertainty built in to complex social systems and locking things in to tight service specifications can provide a brittle and misleading representation of this complexity. The significant risk of acting as though systems are simple and predictable is recognised in the growing body of research on the Human Learning Systems approach to public management[32]. It starts from a recognition that NPM-influenced delivery of public servicers are not actually driven by an objective sense of Best Value but rather a "*drive to create and maintain a defensible position*[33]"

The Human Learning Systems approach solves this question by freeing itself from preconceived ideas about what 'good' looks like, and adopting a systematic curiosity. The focus of management becomes understanding and reflecting on what is actually happening within the system, both positive and negative. Rather than attempting to force the system to perform towards a preconceived, specified set of actions, the focus of management is to continually learn from and adapt to what is working. The collaborative commissioning pathways highlighted in the are highly compatible with this management approach.

Adopting a Human Learning Systems approach requires a clear sense of the outcomes we are seeking to bring about and faith in the ability and intrinsic motivation of people to recognise and address problems and improve lives. It is a fundamentally convivial approach to management and more amenable to the CCIN's aims than New Public Management-inspired approaches which falsely treat human systems as predictable machines which can be controlled.

What the CCIN could offer...

There is an opportunity for the CCIN to show system leadership and support members to transition to this more transformative social value mindset. The authors of this report recognise the challenges which individual councils face in stepping out of current practice and have identified some actionable next steps which the network could take to support them on this journey.

The social value working group has demonstrated the benefit of stepping back from current pressures and learning from what others are doing. The group includes officers from a number of CCIN councils, legal and academic experts, and a staff from number of purpose-led providers. There is appetite to continue to meet and share learning and emergent practice but this would need some ongoing funding from the network.

Many of the models and processes referenced are not widely used or understood, and councils often perceive a risk of legal challenge or judicial review in being the 'first mover' - as evidenced by the very limited take up of the more flexible Innovation Partnership procedure and Light Touch Regimes under the PCR15 procurement regime.

Similarly, there is limited system-wide practice or information sharing on Public Commons Partnerships and Public Service Community Partnerships, and most local authorities wouldn't know how or where to start if they wanted to intentionally pursue them – where they do exist (see for example Union Street, Plymouth34) they have tended to happen iteratively, with the initial impetus coming from an organised community who manage to find supportive individuals within the council.

There would be value for local government as a whole, and CCIN in particular, in further establishing the parameters for good practice and providing a set of template models. There would be value in CCIN members jointly investing in the next stage of this development.

31 https://www.in-abundance.org/reports/commoning-the-public-translating-european-new-municipalism-to-the-uk-context

32 https://www.humanlearning.systems/

33 https://www.changingfuturesnorthumbria.co.uk/rethinking-public-service

34 https://www.newlocal.org.uk/case-studies/re-occupying-union-street/

The CCIN's dynamic purchasing system uses a supplier selection process based on an 'added-value' approach to social value. There is an opportunity to rethink how this might operate in line with the findings of the working group, and assess whether a future iteration could be built which could provide councils with an 'off the shelf' legally complaint mechanism to make investments in shared-purpose collaborations, with suppliers selected based on capability, commitment and willingness to work towards shared goals. This would significantly increase the ability of smaller member councils to adopt the approaches outlined in this report.

Recommendations

The working group recommends that the CCIN network should seek to:

- Lobby local government umbrella organisations and central government to:
  - Recognise the different approaches needed when carrying out market purchasing vs intervening in complex social systems
  - Recognise the importance of relational working and collaborative commissioning models in setting the conditions to achieve ambitious social value goals
  - Discourage the use of pick and mix social value menus, especially when commissioning in complex social systems
- Develop a social value community of practice to continue to share best practice and examples of collaborative commissioning
- Initiate an open collaboration to develop a set of open-source template models for the collaboration models identified.
- Scope the development of a purchasing framework for purposeful collaborations to replace the CCIN's dynamic purchasing system when it expires in March 2025.

And that CCIN Member councils should:

- Advocate for an independent National Social Value Taskforce to help shift the prevailing narrative that social value is additional and best expressed through the National TOMs
- Actively promote collaborative commissioning pathways where systems are complex and goals are long term.
- Avoid use of standardised social value menus in complex social systems
- Support staff to understand principles of collaborative commissioning and how this might apply to their professional context
- Recognise the importance of open, iterative governance structures like relational contracts, thin layer cooperatives, alliance contracts and public commons partnerships when working with complex, long-term social, economic and environmental goals.
- Look for local opportunities to seed public commons partnerships, public service community partnerships, and innovation partnerships and invite communities and partners to initiate proposals.
- Set broad aspirational policy frameworks and goals which can guide context-specific social value decision making
  - Importantly for councils seeking to grow the cooperative and social economy, it is essential that council strategies make explicit reference to the value of cooperation and the commons as tools that generate economic and social agency – see CCIN's Cooperative Development Toolkit36 for evidence base to support this case.
- Consider how internal commissioning resources could be reprofiled towards service design and system stewardship, as opposed to compliance and audit of transactional social value.

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