

Building back a better Britain

The new National Infrastructure Strategy will require the right kind of determination from industry and government to deliver its promises in a way that serves all corners of the UK, says Jacobs' Donald Morrison.



Donald Morrison is people and places solutions senior vice president Europe and digital strategies at Jacobs.

Despite being one of Europe's richest economies when measured per head, Britain is currently the most unbalanced on the continent. Disparities between the regions run deep across the country, with average incomes throughout the north west, south west, West Midlands and Wales as much as 30% lower than in the capital and 40% of the UK's output currently produced in London and the south east.

For too long, our industrial strategy has prioritised GDP growth and business prosperity on a macro scale, while the social value of infrastructure investment - community building, inclusive development, connectivity and environmental sustainability - have been denied the dominance they deserve.

For this reason, I very much welcome a National Infrastructure Strategy committed to 'levelling up' Britain's economy via robust investment and policy promises that are dedicated not only to rebuilding, but to re-balancing too. We, as industry leaders, must

support chancellor Rishi Sunak's levelling promise of boosting opportunities so "those living in all corners of the UK get their fair share of our future prosperity".

The strategy's promise to introduce a £4bn Levelling Up Fund comes as a particularly welcome commitment, as does the establishment of a National Infrastructure Bank based in the north of England. But perhaps the most significant news is the Treasury's updated review of its 'Green Book', the government's method of appraising the value of projects, to ensure they support the levelling up agenda.

This may seem a dull technicality to pinpoint, but this set of regulations in fact has substantial impact, determining how - and, crucially, where - government investment is allocated. The *Green Book* has long been criticised for favouring London and the south east, so the Treasury's reprioritisation of these principles indicates an important and necessary step forward.

We have a duty to hold the government to account on its promises, as well as to perform our own share of the necessary self-reflection, in order to ensure that we play our part in embedding sophisticated modes of measurement that go beyond simply delivering a project on time and on budget.

The adage "only what gets measured, gets managed", first coined by management consultant Peter Drucker, seems poignant here. The infrastructure industry is undeniably dominated by a focus on measurement, a symptom of our exacting culture and mind-set as engineers. However, we are beginning to fall out of pace with the changing world.



Social value needs to be at the heart of infrastructure investment to ensure that the UK can build back better.

The modes of measurement we venerate are often narrow in scope, led by commercial realities of competing in a competitive market, and outdated public sector procurement practices. We must now up our game and exhibit the level of ambitious vision required to meet the societal challenges the UK is facing.

It has long been acknowledged that infrastructure is the backbone of a solid and resilient economy, but we believe it has the power to buttress strong, vibrant and inclusive communities, too. Efficiently planned and developed infrastructure has even been shown to underpin the achievement of up to 80% of the United Nations sustainable development goals.

The Social Value Act passed by government in 2012 indicated a promising start on this path to a re-evaluating infrastructure decision-making. The more recent measures outlined this year by the Cabinet Office, stating that businesses seeking to win government work must set out how they will also deliver on social value priorities from 2021, confirm that the centring of social impact in infrastructure planning is steadily climbing the government's agenda.

But there is more that could be done to position social value

with still greater precedence in decision-making. Recognising this challenge, our partners Simetrica-Jacobs have developed the world's first set of equity weights, using a methodology approved by the Treasury's *Green Book*, for effectively quantifying social value in infrastructure planning that has already been put to into action in partnership with the Department for Transport.

This is the kind of innovation in planning, utilising digital modelling and data to inform decision-making in a way that reflects social as well as monetary value, that will enable government and businesses to deliver the prime minister's 'levelling up' agenda via shrewder, more objective decisions and to work together most effectively. It is my hope that with this move toward considered data-driven planning, will come a means for social value to take precedence where traditional 'cost v benefit' strategies once dominated.

The UK government must therefore follow through on its commitments to take into consideration not only how best to invest its infrastructure funding, but also where the structural support will be most beneficial. An 'outcome-based' model for infrastructure planning, with social value embedded at its heart, will be essential in ensuring the UK can build back better as a unified nation.

The time to 'think think think' before we 'build build build' is now, to make sure we're designing infrastructure that will be of long-term benefit to all of us socially, environmentally and economically. Only then can we be confident that communities feel our projects are being developed for them, not simply provided to them.



Subscribe to our new YouTube Channel
Type Infrastructure Intelligence in YouTube or click here

