

How public sector procurement aids the levelling up agenda

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Contents



Welcome	<u>03</u>
About LHC Group	03
Levelling Up	04
The role of housing in the levelling-up agenda	<u>05</u>
New builds, the Future Homes Standard & tackling fuel poverty	<u>07</u>
The Role of MMC in the levelling-up agenda	09
Case Studies	<u>11</u>
ntegrating equality, diversity, and inclusion	<u>12</u>
Diversity in public sector frameworks	<u>13</u>
Using procurement to lay strong foundations for levelling up	<u>15</u>
Connecting with communities	<u>16</u>
LHC Community Benefit Fund	<u>16</u>

Welcome

Elaine Elkington, Interim Managing Director, LHC Group



This LHC report looks at Levelling Up - the government's signature domestic political agenda - and how public sector procurement can play a key part in this agenda, supporting an equitable market that delivers opportunities to all parts of the UK.

We look at this issue particularly through the lens of housing, as this area is still to be fully recognised for its impact and importance. Ideally, housing and levelling up should be inextricably linked, making sure that programmes to deliver high quality homes in deprived areas across the UK generate jobs and innovation in new build, along with sustainable, low carbon retrofit skills, improved diversity, equality and inclusion and a strong pipeline of work for local firms.

These are just some of the topics examined in this report.

We are grateful for the contributions to this report, and welcome feedback and discussion on the many fascinating issues raised by our authors.

Join the discussion on LinkedIn using the hashtag #LHCLevellingUp

About LHC

LHC delivers a simple core service: we bring buyers and suppliers together, to build and maintain public property more efficiently and cost effectively, and to benefit the local community.

LHC is a not-for-profit central purchasing body that develops fast, efficient and compliant frameworks in England, Scotland and Wales, shaped around local needs. Our unique strength is our local presence via regional hubs. A centre of technical excellence supports this local delivery, supported by regional managers and local client service teams who are focused on helping clients deliver their projects and local objectives.

LHC's frameworks are available to all publicly funded contracting authorities to procure works, goods and services to construct, refurbish and maintain social housing, schools and public buildings.

LHC was first established by London boroughs in 1966, but now has offices and field-based staff throughout all parts of Britain. More than 700 public organisations use our frameworks. As a not-for-profit consortium, LHC returns over a million pounds a year to its members to reinvest in their local communities, including a wide range of social impact schemes.

www.lhcprocure.org.uk

Levelling Up

The Prime Minister made a commitment to 'levelling up' from his very first speech, and it formed a key part of his General Election manifesto in 2019.

References to this policy appeared throughout the Queen's Speech in 2020, and a Levelling Up Unit shared between Number 10 and the Cabinet Office was established in May 2021. A ministerial reshuffle in September 2021 then saw a restyled housing ministry established at the new Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). What has probably felt like just a slogan is being more formally embedded into the structure of government and its priorities.

Last year, the Chancellor used the Autumn Statement to announce the first £1.7bn allocation from the Levelling Up Fund, investing in 105 local transport, regeneration and culture projects around the UK. The Levelling Up Fund, which was announced at the Spending Review 2020, is a local infrastructure fund allocating £4.8bn over the course of the Parliament. Round two will launch this spring.

The funding is obviously welcome, but as Professor Noble Francis, economics director at the Construction Products Association, points out, "it is just a starting point after 10 or more years of austerity affecting towns across the country that badly need regeneration and better infrastructure links."

More recently, a Levelling Up White Paper was published in February 2022, a broad statement of intent that also brought in details of a new devolution framework, the establishment of a new independent data body and a new Levelling Up Advisory Council.

It also included information on 12 missions across four broad areas: boosting productivity and living standards by growing the private sector, especially in those places where they are lagging; spreading opportunities and improving public services, especially in those areas where they are weakest; restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost; and, empowering local leaders and communities, especially in those places lacking local agency.

We look forward to the promised comprehensive programme of consultation and engagement across the UK on this complex topic, and the opportunity to put forward the insights, challenges and points of view contained in this report.



"Levelling up - meaning, in our view, the spreading of economic and social opportunities more evenly across the country - is laudable and should be a priority for any Government."

BEIS Committee report on post-pandemic recovery, July 2021



The role of housing in the levelling-up agenda

Tracy Harrison, Director, Northern Housing Consortium



The arguments in support of the so called 'left behind' places have been made. But recognition of the role that good quality housing can play as an economic leveller still has some way to go.

Housebuilding provides significant economic stimulus -

and retrofit of existing homes even more so, according to many estimates. And with one of the more positive aspects of Covid's legacy being an entirely new flexibility regarding working practices, it means that for many people and jobs, home location in proximity to 'place of work' has become largely irrelevant. This creates an opportunity and impetus to breathe new life into some of these 'left behind' places, and housing undoubtedly plays a major part in that.

There was already substantial evidence that poor quality housing has demonstrable impacts on people's health and wellbeing, and the pandemic has brought to the fore these long-standing issues.

So, improving the quality of our existing housing has taken on a new urgency but it also provides opportunities, especially in the requirement to retrofit homes to reduce carbon emissions and achieve our net zero targets.

This is particularly critical in the North of England where housing accounts for a quarter of total carbon emissions. Just to get all homes to Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) band C - the first staging post on the road to net zero - we need to retrofit two-thirds of the North's homes.

That's over 4 million homes across the North. If we take the 2035 target for the Government set in the Clean Growth Strategy as the deadline to get homes to EPC C, that means retrofitting 270,000 Northern homes per year from the 2020 baseline the most recent data gives us.

It's a massive challenge - and breaking it down further doesn't make it any less daunting. It's equivalent to 737 homes per day; 30 homes an hour: a home every two minutes in the North just to meet the Government's own target (and remember, that target needs to be reached five years earlier for low-income households).

But the supply and demand dynamics of housing decarbonisation is currently something of a 'chicken and egg' challenge. The industry required to take on the decarbonisation of our homes is emergent as demand from customers is still in a latent phase. The social housing sector has a big enough sector-spend to influence this fledging market through procurement to aggregate demand, but long-term certainty over funding is the essential component that would engender the necessary confidence and ambition to enable market transformation at scale by helping to build demand, develop supply chains, promote technological pathways, and build skills in local economies. >



Poor quality housing has demonstrately demonstrable impacts on people's health and wellbeing, and the pandemic has brought to the fore these long-standing issues

The role of housing in the levelling-up agenda (cont.)

Tracy Harrison, Director, Northern Housing Consortium

The social housing sector is at the forefront of developing the skills and market to support this ambition. This 'green recovery' will help areas in the North of England, many of which are developing specialisms in new methods of construction and also renewable energy.

These green jobs could be created very rapidly and at scale. In the North alone approximately 77,000 direct jobs could be created in the home retrofit market.

What we know for certain is there is a desperate shortage of skills in green retrofit for those who need re-training and those furthest from the jobs market in areas in need of levelling up. Some of these jobs will require a 'just transition' to allow professions such as gas fitters to diversify into housing decarbonisation work.

One of the reflections from our research is that there is an opportunity to employ a localised approach to updating skills and job creation. We foresee a localised place-based skills programme because places will vary in demands for types of energy schemes.

At local level, many providers are already grasping the opportunities. Social housing providers are offering apprenticeships and starting to develop partnerships with their local colleges and LEPs to secure their help in making retrofit skills a priority for economic recovery.

As we move forward, housing associations and local authorities will need people with new skills to help assess and design schemes and projects to decarbonise their own housing stock. Combined authorities with devolved responsibility for adult skills budgets are beginning to prioritise retrofit skills to boost take-up.

The sooner that a programme of green retrofit can begin, the more jobs can be created and the more significant the economic impact could potentially be.

Let's not waste the lessons that Covid has taught us but use them to fuel an ambition to create a future that benefits us all, because levelling up has advantages for the whole country.



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New builds, the Future Homes Standard and tackling fuel poverty

John Slaughter, Director of External Affairs, Home Builders Federation



The relationship between poor housing conditions, high energy bills for heating and fuel poverty is well known. The problem can easily be self-perpetuating. Households with comparatively low incomes cannot afford the best quality housing and it is older, poorer quality housing which is most likely to be

energy inefficient and result in higher heating costs and fuel poverty. Unsurprisingly, those affected by fuel poverty also have poorer health than those living in more energy efficient homes.

According to Government figures, approximately 1 in 10 households are fuel poor, so this is an important societal issue which will become more pressing as the Government seeks to take action to meet its binding Net Zero target. And this is not a problem that will simply solve itself. Almost by definition those caught by fuel poverty will need help or external intervention to enable them to escape the fuel poverty trap.

One important way of breaking through the entrenched problems associated with poor housing and fuel poverty is to build new homes of all tenures that are energy efficient, cheaper to heat and suited to today's lifestyles.

New homes built to current Building Regulations standards are already far more energy efficient than most of the country's existing housing stock, much of which was built before the Second World War. The median energy efficiency score for new houses is within EPC B and B, whereas the median score for existing houses is within Band D.

EPC data also shows that the estimated ${\rm CO_2}$ emissions for existing houses were more than twice the level of those for new houses. So, even today new homes are making a major contribution to reducing carbon emissions and fuel poverty.

This contribution will soon grow further with the introduction of the Future Homes Standard from 2025. The Government proposals for the Standard will be introduced through Part L of the Building Regulations and will require new homes to reduce their carbon emissions by 75-80% compared to the requirements of today's Building Regulations. An interim 31% reduction in emissions for new build has already been announced under a change to Part L from June this year. >



EPC data also shows that the estimated CO₂ emissions for existing houses were more than twice the level of those for new houses.

New builds, the Future Homes Standard and tackling fuel poverty (cont.)

John Slaughter, Director of External Affairs, Home Builders Federation

The Government describes the Future Homes Standard as providing "world-leading" levels of energy efficiency coupled with low carbon heating and the Climate Change Commission views it as providing a 'Net Zero-ready' standard designed to avoid the need for subsequent retrofit. This vision is founded on the likely switch to electricity as the key source of energy for future heating through the use of heat pumps and other new technology, so that new builds will achieve Net Zero as electricity supply itself is decarbonised.

There are significant challenges in changing to new heating technologies – for housing design, developing supply chain capacity, energy infrastructure and skills that will be entailed in achieving the Future Homes Standard – but the home building industry is committed to working collaboratively with the many parties involved to address these and build homes fit for the future.

We established the multi-stakeholder Future Homes Task Force to develop a strategic plan for implementing the Future Homes Standard and other environmental objectives successfully and following its report we have now set up the independent Future Homes Hub to guide and facilitate implementation of the plan.

Our aim is that the Hub should be fully inclusive and it is important that it works with housing associations and local government as well as with the private sector industry. Housing associations have a vital role in tackling fuel poverty and we need to ensure that collaborative work on achieving the Future Homes Standard takes account of the needs of their tenants and those living in local authority accommodation.

We are also keen that the research and development and piloting of new housing designs necessary to meet the Standard can be a shared endeavour across the whole housing sector and with local authorities so that everyone is on the same page in delivering solutions that work for all and send clear signals to the supply chain.

This is a big task, but there is a real will to make it happen.



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The Role of MMC in the levelling-up agenda

Gary Cawley, Regional Director, CPC



The Government, and especially Homes England, is placing increasing weight on MMC in its housebuilding programmes.

The Affordable Homes Programme requires projects to deliver 25% of homes through MMC, while an MMC taskforce has been set up in

Wolverhampton with £10m of seed funding to accelerate the adoption of offsite methods.

This is great news not only for the housing market, but also for residents across the country.

Through CPC projects, we're already seeing social landlords and their tenants reap the benefits of embracing new technology in offsite construction.

In Sheffield we helped to deliver four, four-bedroom family homes in an area of recognised need for affordable homes. They were handed over within 10 months from the start of the initial design work, so not only did the council start to realise their value more quickly, but the families that were in need of quality housing were in their new homes sooner rather than later.

Constructed in quality-controlled factory environments, MMC homes are more airtight, warmer and more energy efficient than traditional brick builds, which will help tackle fuel poverty and address the shocking gaps we have in life expectancy between the richest and poorest areas.

Safe, healthy, warm and comfortable homes are a right for UK citizens, but too many are currently without this most basic of requirements, with an estimated 1.1 million people on a national housing waiting list, according to Shelter. Through MMC, we can deliver more of what we need, more quickly.

Using MMC will also help to tackle carbon emissions by providing homes at EPC band B or higher. According to the recent Northern Housing Monitor from NHC, almost 1 in 17 new homes built across the North since 2016 are below EPC band C, meaning they'll require further measures down the line. This is completely needless.

But the major problem we are currently facing is reluctance to adopt MMC from the social sector.

Picking up and running with 'new' technologies can be seen as economically risky, and we know that a lot of registered providers would rather let the big commercial players be the early adopters and make all the mistakes. >



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The Role of MMC in the levelling-up agenda (cont.)

Gary Cawley, Regional Director, CPC

For many social housing providers this will also be an educational process, as MMC involves a change in the way homes are designed, procured and delivered, which can be a daunting prospect and a barrier for many.

But we're already demonstrating that MMC isn't out of reach. LHC has already supported more than 5,300 MMC-built social homes. With the extra support Government is now starting to provide, we expect to see more widespread uptake for the delivery of truly excellent affordable homes for the country's most in-need.

What will certainly help is aggregation of projects from housing providers across the country, to enable greater standardisation in the supply chain in order that we can make delivery even faster and of a higher-spec – and cheaper, too.

This is something we've started at CPC and LHC. We are connecting social housing providers and encouraging a culture of collaboration across new-build housing through cluster groups, so that we can identify areas in which they can aggregate and seek to approach their projects with MMC together, sharing the risk.

If we can do this - if we can help to scale the MMC market more quickly - then we will soon be helping disadvantaged citizens reap the benefits that a comfortable, safe home brings.



LHC has already supported more than 5,300 MMC-built social homes.



Case Studies

MMC - Parson Cross, Sheffield

Sheffield City Council was looking to launch a small-scale project delivered with MMC, with a view to incorporating it as part of its ambitious Stock Increase Programme, which aims to deliver 3,100 new council homes by 2029.

It identified a site in the Parson Cross area, where there is a recognised need for affordable homes, for four new four-bedroom family homes.

The council partnered with modular builder M-AR through a CPC framework. The four homes were precision engineered in a quality-controlled factory environment in compliance with ISO9001 procedures.



The homes look and feel like a traditionally-built home, with a brick exterior and pitched roof, but they are more efficient and were handed over within 10 months from the initial design work, with onsite works taking around six months.

MMC - Anderston, Glasgow

Completed in 2018, the inner-city Anderston housing renewal project provided 542 new dwellings, mainly for social rent, and was delivered by Sanctuary (Scotland), Glasgow City Centre and the Scottish Government.

Offsite specialist C-C-G was engaged to use modern methods of construction to produce buildings using its IQ timber frame system. This resulted in the production of new homes built to higher environmental standards and better outcomes for tenants. The fabric first approach with higher thermal efficiency, plus other energy efficiency measures such as solar PV, will lead to long-term savings and address issues such as fuel poverty.



The project introduced an extra 140 homes on top of replacement stock, made available for mid-market rent, enabling easier access to city-centre employment hubs for those on modest incomes.

"Nobody left behind": integrating equality, diversity, and inclusion into the levelling up agenda

Anjali Pindoria, Project Surveyor, Avi Contracts Ltd, and EDI Role Model



When I think of 'levelling up', I don't just think of place. Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within the built environment is still very poor, and I'd argue that true levelling up throughout all parts of the UK is not possible without significant progress to improve EDI.

Just 13% of construction employees are women, but when you add ethnicity to the mix, the proportion drops to just 5.7%. It's a woeful situation, especially when you consider that construction output is now being directly impacted by a severe shortage of skilled workers.

According to the CIOB, 100,000 workers left the industry in one quarter alone last year, and Office for National Statistics figures indicate that an estimated 500,000 UK-born workers are likely to leave the sector in the next 10 years as they come to retirement age. The CITB estimates that, even without the growth of 'green jobs', the construction industry needs to recruit more than 217,000 new workers between now and 2025 to support its current activity, including the development of exciting new careers in digitalisation and sustainability. We simply cannot afford to recruit from the same old 'male, pale and stale' demographics as before.

So how do we attract a broader and more diverse workforce, and what can be done so that nobody is left behind?

The key lies in education of the sector to embrace EDI naturally and instinctively. We want to steer away from the tick box attitude, based solely on satisfying contractual obligations, which has been set by some institutions. These hinder EDI rather than encourage it organically. The change needs to come right from the heart of all projects: from the client.

The client is the most heard on any construction and built environment project. If the client can educate downwards throughout their projects, it creates turning points for all companies in the supply chain. Encouraging diverse teams on their projects will help companies move beyond their current recruitment strategies.

But beyond projects, hugely beneficial progress can also come from clients encouraging culture change – for example, encouraging suppliers to undertake broader reviews of their business, showing better leadership and encouraging higher profile role models which could help to inspire more people. The visibility of a more diverse workforce in all levels in an organisation is key. Again, it should be emphasised that this is not a contractual obligation or tick box for projects, rather an industry-wide encouragement for improvement.

We also need to singularly target schools, because if we want new recruits who are from diverse backgrounds, we need to do more to change perceptions. By encouraging younger people to consider a career in construction through programmes like the Go Construct STEM Ambassadors scheme, we showcase how transferable STEM subjects are to construction and the wide opportunities available to all. This will help champion better EDI within the sector and help address the skills shortage, as well as helping to build stronger, more positive working cultures.

Clients in the public sector can help to encourage EDI throughout their procurement practices to ensure nobody is left behind. You are as much construction change-makers and champions as I am, and through our actions we can all make sure that levelling up becomes genuinely meaningful through all parts of society.



Just 13% of construction employees are women, but when you add ethnicity to the mix, the proportion drops to just 5.7%

Diversity in public sector frameworks - the experience from London

Shona Snow, Regional Strategy Manager, LHC London and South East



In 2020, we structured and launched our Architect Design Services framework (ADS1) in partnership with Southwark Council. Our vision was to provide smaller, more diverse practices access to public sector clients in London.

There's a recognition that frameworks tend to attract the same architectural practices and well-known names as suppliers. However, we found that our clients were desperate to tap into fresh new talent, to access something unique that only the very small practices – often with 10 people or fewer – can bring.

Architects at these smaller practices are freed from the constraints of working at larger organisations and often able to demonstrate more flair and creativity in their designs, bringing new methods and materials to the forefront.

Diverse teams can also offer something else: lived experience of an area's underprivileged communities, in the places where many of our clients' projects are sited, bringing entirely new skills and fresh approaches to community engagement, and outcome-led design.

But to attract under-represented practices we had to find them, talk to them one-to-one, work hard to build trust, to understand them, ensure they understood us, and then change the way we do things.

To assess a practice's approach to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in a meaningful way during the tender process meant we had to write a bespoke question to highlight the characteristics of the type of organisations we were looking for. We wanted practices that are diverse, ideally at a leadership level, whose philosophy is inclusive, that understand how to work with under-represented communities and that go out of their way to recruit and provide opportunities to disadvantaged students and young people, especially those from an ethnic minority.

We gave all bidders an extended interview to provide them with a platform to really showcase who they are and what they do. This was the most exciting part of the process – to see in full the untapped innovation that is out there. We've undergone a real learning curve. >



There's a recognition that frameworks tend to attract the same architectural practices and well-known names as suppliers.



Diversity in public sector frameworks - the experience from London (cont.)

Shona Snow, Regional Strategy Manager, LHC London and South East

Most frameworks believe they are assessing EDI by simply requesting ticks in boxes and asking for copies of policies. We did neither of these things because they are simply promises, not real action or results. We felt that the time for paper policies, good intentions, commitments and vague targets was over; it was time for LHC, its partners and its suppliers to demonstrate real EDI results.

We want to see our local authority, housing association and other public sector clients, particularly those in regions of high density with diverse populations and significant regeneration plans, able to appoint suppliers from a comprehensive range of skills and backgrounds that reflect their own demographic, can ask the right questions, understand problems from a grass roots level, and know how to engage with hard-to-reach members of communities.

We've learnt so much from this process that we can now start to introduce similar initiatives across our other programmes.

The main lesson for us is that you must know your market. If you want real innovation you have to work a bit harder to find it. You have to be more creative. Don't just do what you've always done as you'll simply get the same result.

Don't fall on old excuses such as there not being enough Black, Asian, LGBTQ+ or disabled-led businesses out there. Nor should we place the onus on such practices to be better during bidding processes or be better able to seek out work and make themselves known, especially as we are looking for smaller practices. Often, the resources are not there to easily pursue frameworks and support is needed.

It is incumbent upon us as public sector commissioners to identify and address inequalities and barriers in our own processes, and to root out anything that doesn't produce good outcomes.

You need to invest more time, get to know small businesses in a more holistic way, and give them a platform to showcase what they offer. It's the only way you'll find innovation. It can be like a needle in a haystack in some markets, but it's a true revelation when you find it.

Since our experience with ASD1 last year, LHC has continued its work to embed EDI into frameworks. By combining intense and targeted pre-tender engagement, with clear framework objectives and customised scoring and award criteria that relate to social value-led outcomes, we have proven that a more diverse supply base is entirely achievable.

And, by bringing a broader range of practices to the forefront and helping them to access public sector work, often for the first time, we hope to see a transformational change in our built environment so that it better reflects under-represented communities and their needs.



It is incumbent upon us as public sector commissioners to identify and address inequalities and barriers in our own processes, and to root out anything that doesn't produce good outcomes.

Using procurement to lay strong foundations for levelling up

Mij Rahman, Operations Director, LHC



We've all heard the old phrase "failing to prepare is preparing to fail", and this can definitely be applied to the construction sector.

Other chapters in this report have already laid out how housing can contribute to the levelling-up agenda, but if we're

going to realise that value then we have to make sure we're laying the right foundations in the early stages of our projects, and that means we have to get the procurement right.

Procurement can be a powerful enabler, and if we spend the time to get it right we can leverage it to address many of our societal gaps; it's not just about getting a good price or ensuring a certain level of quality.

For example, if your outcomes include boosting local skills, supporting local businesses and increasing diversity in the workforce, all of these targets can be built into the DNA of a project at the procurement stage. Attach targets to them and they can be monitored throughout the length of the contract, with the suppliers held to account.

Of course, for procurement to really help us hit those outcomes, then it's absolutely imperative that we have long-term plans.

Achieving outcomes, whether they're social, environmental or economic, involves time and money, and not all companies have the capability to do that from the off, especially if we're hoping to use smaller, local suppliers. But if those suppliers are signing up to 10 or even 20-year contracts, it gives them confidence of continuity, confidence to invest that time and money to slowly build towards the stated outcomes – and if developing skills and boosting employment are your goals, then it also means guaranteed work for any new people they take on and train.

This long-term thinking can be supported by frameworks. Even though a lot of them only run for four years, call-offs can still be carried out for another four years after their expiry.

Frameworks also help to take the emphasis away from quality and price, as those are already secured, so more time can be spent dedicated to specifying value-based outcomes, including increased social value, accelerating the process.

Whether you use a framework or procure in house, know what you want, be clear about it, and play the long game. That way, we're enabling the whole country to level-up.



Procurement can be a powerful enabler, and if we spend the time to get it right we can leverage it to address many of our societal gaps.

Connecting with communities

Asha Patel, Strategy, Innovation and Growth Director, LHC Group



Public interest in the levelling up agenda usually comes from a deep-seated sense that inequalities in our society are increasingly causing real damage, and something must change to stop the rot. People are asking government and all of us in public sector housing: what are you doing to improve

the lives of local residents, the quality of our homes, our built environment, our jobs and our future?

The commitment of LHC and our housing clients is firmly focused on making a difference. But we cannot achieve this sitting in our offices, simply observing from the outside. Particularly as opportunities start to open up again following Covid-imposed restrictions, the call to action - indeed, our moral obligation - is to genuinely engage at all levels and with all cultures, groups and generations within the communities we serve.

This means listening to the needs of local communities to identify what 'social value' really means to them at a grass roots level.

It also means communicating better about how decisions about housing have a direct impact on our sense of place, affluence and quality of life, health and wellbeing, environmental sustainability and future opportunities for local people - the social fabric of society. We are literally building the future for generations to come, with an obligation and opportunity to reverse the neglect of the past.



be attached as an appendix to Social value is not something to a procurement policy. It should drive everything we do.

LHC Community Benefit Fund

As we emerge from the pandemic, LHC's local presence is key to ensuring local procurement activity improves social inclusion and economic equality.

As part of LHC's commitment to helping public authorities deliver value back to the community, LHC members in each region are given the opportunity to create and distribute a Community Benefit Fund, pooling their rebates and using these funds to give grants to community projects or social causes. Independent, expert Community Benefit Fund managers find the best local charity partners to meet the specific priority needs of members.

Grants have been allocated to community groups and projects focused on diverse issues, including literacy, technology, sustainability, health and wellbeing. In 2019/2020 £1.3m was reinvested across the UK, including £325,000 specifically allocated to community impact schemes.

Further information about the projects that have received funding via the Community Benefit Fund can be found in LHC's latest annual report. The report also outlines the number and type of projects LHC frameworks have been used on, its approach to MMC and provides an update on the newest, best performing and upcoming public sector frameworks.

www.lhcprocure.org.uk/annual-review



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