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# Achieving social value through construction frameworks: the effect of client attributes

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**The UK Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 mandates public sector construction clients to prioritise the resolution of social challenges through procurement. Accordingly, clients are increasingly committing to delivering on social value through capital expenditure. Construction frameworks have been identified as a means of delivering social value, hence their relatively sudden attractiveness. Yet evidence suggests clients are experiencing varied social value benefits from projects procured through frameworks. The study reported in this paper sought to ascertain the causes of such inconsistency. It investigated the influence of client attributes on the ability of frameworks to deliver on social value. A qualitative case study design was adopted. Interactions between a regional framework and two clients were studied from a project procurement perspective using a viable infrastructure delivery model. Findings revealed that certain client attributes influenced a framework's ability to achieve optimal social value. Of significance was the ability of the client to express their latent values and their ability to appoint a project manager who will serve as a social value champion. Findings from this study will enlighten clients on their contributions towards successful social value implementation when engaging with a construction framework.**

## 1. Introduction

Successive governments have initiated policies to enhance socio-economic regeneration within their respective economies (Arrowsmith, 2010; Binks, 2006; Hawkins and Wells, 2006). The prevalence of such policies has continued to attract renewed attention. Also, the use of public procurement in driving the implementation of these sorts of policies has been observed (Arrowsmith, 2010; McCrudden, 2004). In the UK, attempts have been made to use public sector expenditure to drive the implementation of socio-economic policies (Erridge, 2007). Such attempts culminated in the now rested Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships. In the north-west of England, a platform for the procurement of construction works for public and private sector clients, the North West Construction Hub (NWCH), evolved from this era. NWCH is a construction framework that offers high levels of flexibility to different clients depending on the client values, particularly as it concerns social value (SV) implementation through project delivery. It was established in 2009 in response to the UK central government's drive to improve procurement efficiencies within the public sector. All the nine regions of England were encouraged to establish such a 'framework agreement' in accordance with European procurement regulations, which allows any public sector body in that region to access pre-procured design and construction services as individual client organisations. As an entity, NWCH is governed by a board which comprises representatives from public sector client organisations across the north-west of England. The lead authority and legal entity behind NWCH is the Manchester City Council. In its current form, the NWCH is funded through a small levy that is paid by each contractor that is appointed to a project from the framework.

NWCH has recorded mixed performances in facilitating optimal SV implementation during the procurement of construction works for local authorities, due to its flexibility. The construction framework has successfully delivered £1.6 billion worth of projects for public sector construction clients (PSCCs) since 2010, yet NWCH sought to ensure that optimal SV implementation was achieved in accordance with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's SV policy which was adopted in 2014 (NWCH, 2016).

The inconsistencies experienced in SV implementation performance has been attributed to the approach adopted by individual PSCCs in engaging with a procurement vehicle such as the NWCH. Therefore, it can be inferred that PSCCs play a significant role in ensuring effective SV implementation during the procurement of projects through the NWCH, particularly as it concerns project identification and governance. Furthermore, the PSCCs' ability to perform these roles during the project execution process was premised on the values they espouse (Kelly *et al.*, 2008). These values, which include the mandate of the PSCC to the taxpaying public and regeneration of blighted neighbourhoods, influence the project identification decisions as well as procurement pathway decisions.

Although the Latham and Egan reports have blamed the construction industry for its failure to meet client expectations (Egan, 1998; Latham, 1994), other studies have maintained that the client was also culpable (Andersen, 2012; Yang *et al.*, 2014). Accordingly, certain attributes of clients have been identified as influencing their approach to project management. These attributes include the client's size, sector, experience, financial capacity and

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management structure/competency (Lim and Ling, 2002). Kometa *et al.* (1994) admitted that these attributes affect directly the relationships of client organisations with their consultants and indirectly the performance of the project. de Blois *et al.* (2011) mentioned distinct factors occurring within the structures created for project participants by the client and at the level of formal and informal mechanisms of coordination and communication between the client and other project participants as affecting the nature of relationships with other project participants. Also, Ahmad *et al.* (2011) identified three major categories – namely, the qualities of the client representatives, the brief management capabilities and the commitment of the client – in ensuring project success. Expectedly, scholars have advocated for better understanding of the construction client (Boyd and Chinyio, 2006).

Based on this discourse, it can be inferred that the presence of such attributes within PSSCs can affect the ability of the NWCH in engendering successful SV implementation during the procurement of construction projects. Consequently, an understanding of the nature of existing interactions between PSSCs and procurement vehicles, taking cognisance of the peculiar attributes of PSSCs which influence successful implementation of SV, becomes imperative, and this is what this study sets out to achieve.

The subsequent parts of the paper will explore the concept of SV as a value proposition for PSSCs and construction framework agreements. The methodology adopted is discussed prior to the presentation, discussion of findings and conclusion.

## 2. SV as a value proposition for PSSCs

The term ‘social value’ has continued to defy a commonly accepted definition. Wood and Leighton (2010) described it as the ‘soft’ non-financial impact of organisations and programmes of work and investments, which may include communities, individuals and environmental well-being. Russel (2013) averred that SV is the outcome benefits of certain activities, performed by any organisation, which are important to the organisation’s stakeholders. The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 described SV as the maximisation of additional social outcomes through the procurement of goods and services (HM Government, 2014). From the following, the subjective nature of SV definition can be observed. For this study, SV is described as the additional outcome of publicly funded investment programmes, towards their local communities, varying from employing local suppliers, using local work forces and creating sustained apprenticeship opportunities.

Elkington (1999) argued that the success of an organisation cannot be judged solely by its economic performance apart from its externalities, stating that its social and environmental performances are equally as important in determining their overall performance. Furthermore, he maintains that social auditing as performed by an organisation can be used to measure its performance against society’s expectations. For public sector clients, SV has become necessary considering heightening ethical

requirements and public expenditure monitoring. Accordingly, public procurement, such as the delivery of construction projects, has become a strategic tool for implementing SV within the local economy and not just for fulfilling the traditional ethos of transparency and fairness (Erridge, 2007).

## 3. Framework agreements

Framework agreements have been established under the European directive EU 2004/18/EC (EC, 2004) to organise, supply, work and service contracts, the awarding procedure of which is under European procurement law (Tennant and Fernie, 2012). Created to foster collaborative relations between contracting parties for a period usually not exceeding 4 years, frameworks through the aggregation of demand allow PSSCs to establish long-term relationships with integrated supply chains. They mark a progressive form of long-term strategic partnering between clients and supply chains. Frameworks provide for the coordination of single independent projects that can be procured through minicompetition in the future with clients being able to have their own bespoke conditions for the delivery of individual projects. Tennant and Fernie (2012) classify framework agreements into three categories – namely, (a) direct client framework such as the British Airports Authority framework, (b) framework with agreed commercial model such as ProCure 21 for National Health Service projects and (c) frameworks managed by intelligent procurement organisations such as the NWCH.

McDermott *et al.* (2012) elucidated several benefits accruable from frameworks. Beneficial as framework agreements may seem, some discordant opinions concerning their utility to clients still exist. Proponents such as Tennant and Fernie (2012) stated that public clients have applied framework agreements towards achieving value for money and improved contractor’s performance and quality through longer and stronger relations with their contractors as clients. Conversely, Loader (2010) argued that framework agreements were not suitable for public clients during times of austerity. Continuing, he suggested that such aggregation of demand reduces competition and the number of direct suppliers of public goods and services, hence triggering an increase in the prices of public goods due to the lack of competitors.

However, an increasing number of PSSCs have resorted to using framework agreements to procure their construction projects. This makes this study imperative as it seeks to provide PSSCs desirous of procuring projects through the NWCH and similar frameworks with ample knowledge concerning the attributes which need to be realigned to engender successful SV implementation performance during project procurement and delivery.

## 4. Research methodology

The use of a systems approach in studying client organisations and their relationships with other construction industry participants is not new (Boyd and Chinyio, 2006). In this qualitative case study, the use of a viable system model (VSM)-

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based methodology – the viable infrastructure delivery systems model (VIDM) (Awuzie and McDermott, 2015) – enabled the presentation of the relationships between the PSCCs and other construction project participants within an interorganisational and multilayered structure. Also, it allowed for the identification of project stakeholders during the implementation process (delivery system). Using the VSM appropriately responds to the criticisms which have continued to trail implementation research over the seeming inability to present implementation as an interorganisational and multilayered activity (Hill and Hupe, 2014). This is in sync with the VSM’s utility for unravelling complexity within organisations (Hoverstadt and Bowling, 2005; Schwaninger, 2006). Furthermore, it was used to understand interactions existing between the PSCCs, NWCH and project participants on separate projects through an abductive approach (Weick *et al.*, 2005).

This study forms an integral part of a multicase study into the relationship between NWCH and PSCCs and how it influences

SV implementation during procurement (NWCH, 2012). The broader study involved the conduct of an evaluation of the NWCH’s extant business model, with regard to its engagement with multiple PSCCs and the contracting organisations present on the construction framework, as it pertains to SV implementation facilitation during project procurement processes in the north-west of England. It was expected that this may lead to an eventual redesign of the framework’s business model. The case study strategy remains apt for assessing interorganisational relationships and implementation processes (Dickinson *et al.*, 2007). The use of case studies allows for in-depth understanding of a phenomenon as is the case in this study (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003). Also, it encourages the application of various data collection techniques (Yin, 2009). Although the larger study consists of several case studies to engender replication and analytic generalisation (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), this study seeks to report two cases, project A and project B, exploring interactions between two PSCCs and the NWCH, only. Figure 1 highlights the relationship being explored by this study.

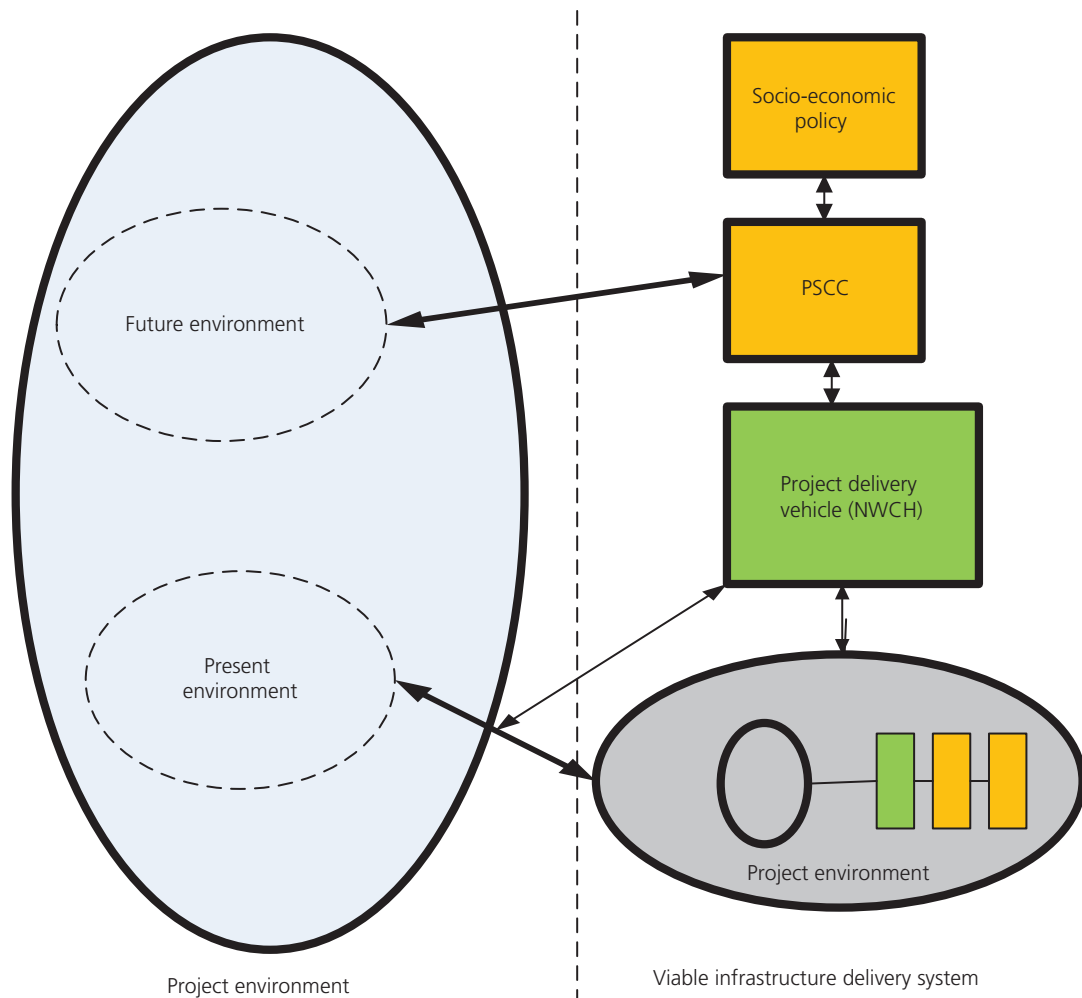


Figure 1. Relationship between PSCC and NWCH from a VIDM perspective. Source: authors’ fieldwork in 2014

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In Figure 1, the metasystem of the project delivery system which comprises the socio-economic policy – the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, for instance – the PSCC and the NWCH is shown. Based on the tenets of the VIDM's methodology, the metasystem is responsible for functions associated with policy, development and delivery of the policy objectives. Whereas the policy subsystem of the VIDM is responsible for strategic decisions concerning the project deliverables and the alignment of such deliverables to extant policy, the PSCC is responsible for developing the programmes and projects through which these strategic decisions/policies can be actualised. It is for this reason that this subsystem is termed the 'development system' in the VIDM. The roles played by these subsystems have to be congruent with the future and present expectations within the project environment. From an SV perspective, the future expectation in this context connotes issues such as a reduction in unemployment levels and improved and affordable access to job centres among others. Accordingly, the strategic policies are designed to cater to such expectations. Similarly, the present environment depicts the extant conditions within the local economy as it pertains to high unemployment, lack of jobs, and so on.

The NWCH is situated in the delivery subsystem of the VIDM. Impliedly, this subsystem, alongside the development subsystem, assumes responsibility for the delivery of the programmes and projects developed by the PSCC while engendering the actualisation of the policy's mandate during the procurement phase of the project. This is done through the ability of the NWCH to coordinate the procurement process and to conduct monitoring and audit functions at different intervals. The implementation level is the context where the actual activities associated with project delivery occur.

Projects A and B were capital projects procured through the NWCH for two distinct local authorities, and they were both situated in the north-west region of England.

Project A involved the renovation of a town hall and a library complex. It was expected to be delivered over a 4-year period (2010–2014) at a cost of £154 million. The clients declared their intention to deliver on SV during project delivery. Upon completion, claims were made on the added value which the project brought to the local supply chain, among which was the

engagement of 66 apprenticeships. Project B was the construction of a youth centre with sporting and catering facilities. The client was a fire and rescue department. At a cost of £5.2 million, the project was executed over an 18-month period. It was commissioned in 2013. The client and delivery partners accorded the project a pass mark with regard to delivering on SV targets, particularly with the creation of eight apprenticeships during project delivery.

A case study protocol was developed, prior to the data collection stage (Yin, 2009). Data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with purposively selected interviewees. Triangulation was achieved through a review of project and policy documents (Patton, 1987). For the avoidance of source criticism, such documents were selected through purposive sampling (Miller and Alvarado, 2005). Purposive sampling and snowballing sampling were conducted during interviewee selection (Denscombe, 2007). At this stage of the study, it was not the intent of the authors to select cases on the ability of the cases to fulfil the criteria required either for analytical generalisation or replication. Rather, the selection was premised on the needs to describe the extant relationship between the PSCCs and NWCH and to identify attributes of the PSCC with the potential to influence the relationship with the NWCH and the overall successful implementation of SV.

A total of seven interviews were held with representatives of the two PSCCs and NWCH, lasting an average of an hour, respectively. Table 1 presents the distribution of the interviewees according to their organisations, project and position.

Questions were asked to gain an understanding of the following: client's values concerning SV implementation, the role of the PSCC in the selection of contractors/suppliers, choice of contracting strategy, SV measurement and SV implementation reportage through the NWCH. For this study, the PSCCs selected were deemed to be intelligent repeat clients who were well versed in procuring projects. However, in the wider study, PSCCs and projects were selected based on their distinct characteristics (Chinyio *et al.*, 1998). The recordings from the interview sessions were transcribed and analysed qualitatively. The categories of attributes mentioned by Ahmad *et al.* (2011) were relied on in this case as pre-set themes.

Table 1. Interviewees' profiles

Interviewee	Designation	Organisation	Project
A	Construction manager	PSCC 1	Project A
B	Client (representative)	PSCC 1	Project A
C	Project manager (client side)	PSCC 2	Project B
D	Deputy manager (estates and development – client side)	PSCC 2	Project B
E	Framework manager	NWCH	Projects A and B
F	Social value coordinator	NWCH	Projects A and B
G	Contractor's representative	Contractor	Project B

Source: authors' fieldwork in 2014

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## 5. Discussion of findings

The findings of this study are reported herein and are discussed in two parts. The first part examines the rationale behind the decision of PSCCs to use frameworks for their capital projects, whereas the second aspect dwells on the attributes identified from the interviews. The findings from the first part were deduced from an analysis of relevant project and organisational documents such as the PSCC procurement strategy and project profile.

### 5.1 Rationale for using NWCH

Construction clients have been advised to endeavour to align their procurement strategies to their organisational objectives (Kumaraswamy and Dissanayaka, 1998). Accordingly, the NWCH possesses the required flexibility to allow clients, particularly the experienced ones, to use its platform to achieve SV. Clients in both cases indicated that they chose NWCH to provide flexibility and reduce time to market for their projects. From the clients' perspective, having flexibility and reducing time to market were beneficial; nevertheless, it did not lead to achieving optimal SV outcomes. From the documents reviewed, it was observed that PSCC 1 and PSCC 2 had the inherent capability to identify a suitable procurement route for fulfilling the business case behind the conceptualisation of the project. For example, PSCC 2 had a government grant, as part of their funding sources, which was time dependent; therefore, they had to find the quickest route to market to fulfil the timely delivery of the grant requirements. Also, clients' efforts to deliver SV were not diminished by their decision to use NWCH; neither did it improve as the NWCH was responsible only for facilitating and creating the appropriate environment for the actualisation of the PSCCs' values during the front end of the project. Clients retained a significant proportion of responsibility for successful implementation. It is expected that this flexibility would serve as NWCH's unique selling point for attracting potential clients.

### 5.2 Attributes of clients impacting successful performance

Attributes of the PSCC which were found to be impacting on the successful implementation of SV in the case study examined include the ability to manage the brief effectively, the presence of an organisational commitment towards SV implementation and the qualities of the client-side representatives during the procurement and subsequent delivery of the project.

#### 5.2.1 Effective brief management

Construction clients are expected to assume a strategic role in the procurement of projects, particularly as it pertains to the identification and disclosure of the values they espouse, firstly as a business and secondly as a construction client. Boyd and Chinyio (2006) maintain that the client needs to play a greater role in enabling an easy identification and delivery of such values. Similarly, Infrastructure UK (IUK) had recently advocated for PSCCs to improve their delivery capabilities during procurement of infrastructure projects (IUK, 2013). Accordingly, PSCCs are to show leadership at project delivery stages to enable identification and implementation of SV objectives (Dorée *et al.*, 2011).

Unfortunately, the absence of key staff within these PSCCs has led to the outsourcing of significant roles pertaining to brief development and management to external consultants (Boyd and Chinyio, 2006), hence increasing the complexity experienced within the internal structures of most PSCCs (de Blois *et al.*, 2011).

In both cases of PSCC 1 and PSCC 2, the clients clearly assumed a critical role in the implementation of SV: adopting, as they were, strategic responsibilities, such as identifying and espousing their values; choosing the right delivery partner with capabilities to deliver such values, through minicompetition; proposing the right contract strategy; and possessing the right culture required for dealing with contractors on the NWCH. The clients protected their culture through ensuring that the brief handed down to the framework fully depicted their latent values. Also, they ensured stringent adherence to the brief during procurement proper with the guidance of NWCH.

#### 5.2.2 Organisational commitment towards delivering social value

Organisational commitment to project success has been identified as a significant client attribute influencing project success (Ahmad *et al.*, 2011). Clients are expected to express this commitment through their procurement activities. In this case, both clients decided on distinct criteria for implementing SV. These criteria ranged from the usual key performance indicators of local spending to the type and numbers of apprenticeships. The clients' construction experience was reflected in the decision-making process. For instance, owing to PSCC 1's well-known history of collaboration with contractors, they were able to plan successfully, and PSCC 2's version of SV evolved from their organisational perspective on contributing to the local societies wherever they operated. These clients adopted a proactive role, through forming client project teams and using such teams in managing the performance of their projects. This management of SV implementation was carried out through constant monitoring and control either directly by the organisation or through an outsourced partner. PSCC 1 had regular meetings to discuss arising issues with contractors openly, and they were able to improve their project's performance accordingly.

The organisational culture of clients, in both cases, transferred on to their main contractors, as contractors attempted to fulfil the client's requirements with respect to SV. The cultural influence created by clients on the contractor's perspectives of SV shaped the SV objectives achieved. PSCC 1 and PSCC 2 were able to transfer their organisational culture beyond the main contractor and through tier 2 supply chain members where the lower tiers took part in delivering SV as well. The partnership culture supported by clients allowed them to improve the performance of contractors particularly as it pertains to SV aspects.

#### 5.2.3 Qualities of client representatives

Construction clients have been known to face various challenges in their attempts to deliver on their latent and stated values during

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project procurement and delivery. These challenges often range from the unavailability of the right resource within such organisations; one of the reasons posed for the paradigmatic shift to the use of public–private partnerships in the delivery of social services (Hodge and Greve, 2009). Such resources usually consist of skilled personnel and appropriate financial capabilities. Considering the relationship drawn by Munns and Bjeirmi (1996) between effective project management and project success, it can be inferred that the PSCCs need a great measure of in-house project management skills to be able to drive SV implementation successfully.

In PSCC 1 and PSCC 2, it was discovered that there was a conscientious effort on their part to achieve their latent values by introducing individual champions into the projects as client-side project managers. The recruitment plan of the clients had a significant impact on the SV outcome as the individual's understanding of the clients' ethos, goals and objectives was reflected on the construction phases. In PSCC 1, champions were selected from the PSCC and the main contractor, whereas in PSCC 2, one internal staff was recruited for the role of client project manager to drive these values. For instance, in PSCC 2, owing to the desire of the PSCC to deliver on local community engagement, apprenticeships and other aspects of social regeneration through the project, the project manager was recruited from the operations department of the PSCC with a long track record of advocacy for SV. This selection was pivotal to the various successes achieved in project B. Evidence from the interviews showed that the presence of such an individual champion representing the PSCC was critical to the successful implementation of SV, notwithstanding the organisational commitment of the PSCC in that regard. In project B, the client's project manager played a significant role in ensuring proper implementation of SV due to her self-motivation, passion, knowledge and experience. The individual's role was proven to be more important than the contractual strategy in the case of the PSCC 2 where similar projects procured by the PSCC 2 with other individuals serving as project managers did not have the same impact on local communities and SV implementation.

## 6. Conclusion

The utility of construction frameworks in delivering on policy outcomes such as SV has been elucidated severally. Accordingly, PSCCs have resorted to using these frameworks to deliver SV, particularly in the aftermath of the enactment of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012. The NWCH happens to be one of such frameworks, and it has been extensively utilised in north-west England by PSCCs therein. However, varied degrees of implementation performance have been noticed across a spectrum of projects procured through the NWCH. This study sought to identify, using a qualitative case study research design and a VIDM-enabled theoretical lens, the kind of client attributes capable of influencing SV implementation performance on two projects procured through NWCH. These projects were described as recording successful SV implementation, hence their selection.

Evidence from the data sets collated and analysed confirmed that certain attributes of PSCCs were capable of and did influence SV implementation performance on these projects. This goes to confirm further that client attributes are capable of undermining project success. It is expected that PSCCs desirous of implementing SV through construction frameworks should embark on a self-assessment of their organisational commitment towards SV and their ability to manage implementation briefs in such a manner that ensures vivid communication of their latent values to frameworks. Finally, they should be able to resource adequately their project team with individuals who are passionate about SV and its successful implementation.

The presence of these attributes would allow PSCCs to interface efficiently with NWCH at the front-end stages of the project and engender effective performance management across the delivery phase. Effective performance management is essential for successful SV implementation.

It is expected that this study will have strong implications for practice particularly for PSCCs. Also, it must be noted that this study does not make any attempt at generalising its findings as it is just reporting an aspect of the broader study of which it forms an integral part and should be treated as such.

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