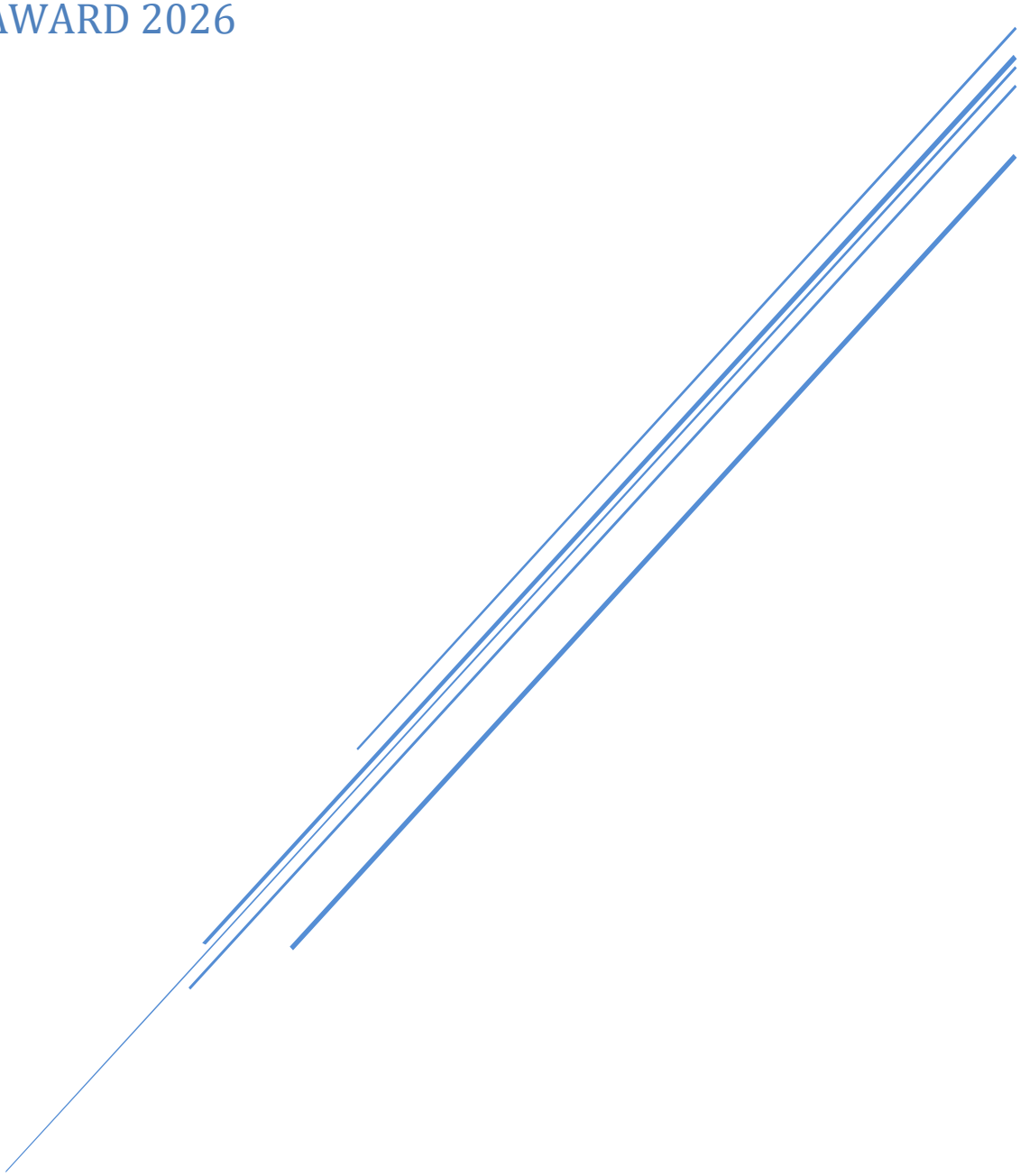
HOW CAN NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE DELIVER EFFECTIVE LOCAL COMMUNITY BENEFITS?

NIPA AWARD 2026



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1. Introduction

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) such as new reservoirs, power stations and transport networks are central to the UK's future, both in terms of delivering economic growth and climate resilience. However, such projects often generate strong local opposition, reflecting a fundamental tension between national need and local impact. As Maidment (2015) and MacDonald (2025) suggest, this conflict persists because the "public interest" is not a fixed fact, but a socially constructed and contested ideal.

A common response to opposition is to promise "community benefits" such as local funds or compensation. However, these measures often fail to secure trust because the planning system lacks a coherent understanding of what constitutes a community and what counts as a meaningful benefit, rather than mere mitigation (Glasson, 2017; Määttä, 2024). This essay argues that effective delivery requires moving beyond harm reduction towards a model of shared value and spatial justice. Using the South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO) as a case study, it shows how NSIPs create spatial and temporal mismatches that generate problems with perceptions of legitimacy, and then proposes a framework based on community wealth building and public value. (Boyle *et al*., 2026; Gunton, 2024).

2. Conceptual Framework: Rethinking "Community" and "Benefit"

Planning policy often treats "the community" as a single group located near a project boundary. In practice, infrastructure projects create multiple communities with different interests (Maidment, 2015). First, there is the host community: those closest to the scheme who experience construction traffic, landscape change, noise and environmental risk. Second, there is the beneficiary community: the wider regional or national population who gain improved services, water security or lower-carbon energy. Third, there is the future community: those who benefit later through climate resilience and long-term capacity. When planning combines these groups into one abstract "public interest", it can obscure questions of distributive justice: who gains, who loses, and who decides (Maidment, 2015; MacDonald, 2025).

This helps explain why resistance is often dismissed as "NIMBYism", rather than understood as a rational response to perceived threats to place, identity and fairness (Devine-Wright, 2009). The same confusion applies to perceived benefits. Current practice often confuses damage mitigation with "benefit". Reducing noise, controlling traffic or managing flood risk is necessary, but does not provide the host community with any tangible benefit since it is the minimum duty of responsible development (DESNZ, 2025b). Likewise, one-off payments or symbolic funds can appear transactional rather than transformative (Määttä, 2024).

To deliver meaningful outcomes, this essay proposes a three-tier framework that moves from harm reduction toward the creation of Public Value:

- Tier 1: Mitigatory Benefit (Harm Reduction). This represents the current planning standard, focused on minimising negative externalities through traffic controls, noise barriers, and environmental mitigation (DESNZ, 2025b). It is essentially a process of "doing less bad" to meet regulatory requirements (Been, 2010).

- Tier 2: Distributive Benefit (Gain Sharing). This band ensures the host community receives a meaningful share of the project's economic value (Boyle et al., 2026) and could include local apprenticeships, procurement opportunities for local businesses, discounted utility bills, or ring-fenced community investment funds (Glasson, 2017; DESNZ, 2025a).
- Tier 3: Transformational Benefit (Structural Legacy). Rooted in Community Wealth Building, this tier uses infrastructure as an "anchor" for long-term local economic stewardship (Adams et al., 2016; Boyle et al., 2026). This moves beyond cash payments to shared ownership models and revenue sharing, giving residents a permanent equity stake and a voice in the ongoing management of the asset (Adams et al., 2016; DESNZ, 2025a).

While most NSIPs achieve Tier 1, the failure to consistently reach Tiers 2 or 3 leaves the planning system in a recurring legitimacy crisis, as communities are asked to endure immediate disruption for negligible rewards that they may never experience (Maidment, 2015; Tait, 2011).

3. The Core Problem: Local Sacrifice, Distant Gain

Many infrastructure disputes arise when communities perceive that they are being asked to bear concentrated costs for benefits enjoyed elsewhere (Maidment, 2015; Devine-Wright, 2009).

This creates a spatial mismatch. National projects are typically justified through aggregated benefits such as energy security, or water resilience, yet their burdens are concentrated in specific towns, villages or landscapes (Maidment, 2015). A community may lose farmland, tranquillity or ecological assets so that millions elsewhere gain a more reliable service. This dynamic is particularly acute for large fixed-site projects such as SESRO, but it is equally evident in long linear schemes like HS2 where impacts are distributed across multiple host communities while benefits accrue at a regional or national scale (Glasson, 2017).

It also creates a temporal mismatch. Construction impacts are immediate: traffic, noise, uncertainty and disruption to everyday life. Property values may fall and local roads may become congested during prolonged delivery phases. By contrast, the benefits are often delayed, diffuse and uncertain, arriving many years later once the scheme becomes operational (Glasson, 2017). Communities are therefore asked to absorb present disruption for future gains they may never personally experience, particularly where residents relocate before benefits materialise.

These mismatches are intensified when projects are framed as nationally necessary while host communities have limited influence over outcomes. Effective community benefit must address fairness across space, time and participation.

4. SESRO: A Case Study in Why Benefit Fails

SESRO, a 150 billion litre reservoir proposed in Oxfordshire, illustrates these tensions. The scheme intends to improve long-term water resilience for London, the Thames Valley and the wider South East in response to climate change and population growth (Thames Water, 2024; National Infrastructure Commission, 2018).

From a strategic perspective, that case is credible. However, the host community experiences the project differently. Local concerns raised through opposition "Group Against Reservoir Development" (GARD) include flood risk, groundwater change, biodiversity impacts and prolonged construction disruption (GARD, 2024; Thames Water, 2024).

SESRO therefore highlights a clear distributional imbalance: benefits are regional, while many burdens are intensely local. It also shows why conventional community benefit can fail. If residents do not trust the promoter, do not feel meaningfully heard, and cannot identify a substantial local legacy, then modest benefit offers may be interpreted as public relations rather than partnership (Määttä, 2024). Research on infrastructure conflict suggests communities are more willing to accept difficult trade-offs when decision-making processes are fair and outcomes are perceived as shared (Devine-Wright, 2009; Gunton, 2024). Where they are not, resistance is rational rather than irrational.

SESRO should therefore be understood not simply as a reservoir proposal, but as an example of the wider challenge facing UK infrastructure planning: how to align national need with local justice.

5. A Better Model: From Mitigation to Mutual Gain

To learn from the legitimacy deficits that SESRO exposes, the planning system must move from discretionary mitigation toward structural mutual gain. If infrastructure is to be delivered effectively, community benefit needs to be embedded into project design from the outset.

5.1 Policy-Led Standards

Reliance on voluntary agreements often creates confusion, with developers treating benefits as good will and residents viewing them as compensation (Määttä, 2024). DESNZ (2025a) therefore suggests mandating community benefit funds to create a more consistent "level playing field." Clear national standards would reduce ad-hoc negotiation and give host communities certainty that they are entitled to a meaningful share in project value.

5.2 Spatial and Temporal Rebalancing

Benefits should be targeted where burdens fall. As Boyle et al. (2026) argue, effective measures depend on the specific local situation. This approach requires tailored interventions such as local transport upgrades, skills programmes, or environmental enhancement, rather than generic funds. Benefits should also be front-loaded during construction, when disruption is greatest, rather than delayed until operation begins (DESNZ, 2025a).

5.3 Creating Shared Value

A more ambitious approach would move toward transformational benefits. Public Value principles such as those discussed by Adams et al. (2016) argue that planning should secure long-term societal outcomes, not simply manage land use. This could include shared ownership models, revenue-sharing mechanisms, or community equity stakes, helping infrastructure generate a lasting local legacy through Community Wealth Building.

5.4 Resourcing Participation

Meaningful engagement requires communities to have access to independent expertise. Gunton (2024) argues participation must go beyond a tick in a box and actually hold substance. Funding for community-led plans and transparent appraisal tools, such as Multiple Account Evaluation (MAE), would help ensure local priorities are properly weighed against national objectives.

Ultimately, these reforms are pro-delivery. Projects perceived as fairer and more transparent are less likely to face prolonged conflict, delay, and legal challenge.

6. Conclusion

Nationally significant infrastructure can only deliver effective local community benefits when planning moves beyond mitigation and compensation towards fairness, shared value and long-term stewardship. As the SESRO case demonstrates, opposition often arises not from rejecting infrastructure itself, but from the perception that local communities bear immediate and concentrated costs while benefits are enjoyed elsewhere. Where burdens are localised and rewards are distant, legitimacy weakens and delay becomes more likely.

Effective community benefit therefore requires recognising that "community" is plural, that host places have distinct claims, and that benefits must be tangible, proportionate and timely. This means embedding distributive and transformational benefits into project design through early investment, local economic opportunities, environmental enhancement and mechanisms for communities to share in the value created. It also requires giving communities the resources and influence to participate meaningfully in decisions that reshape their places.

Ultimately, national infrastructure and local justice should not be treated as competing goals. Projects that create visible local legacy alongside national resilience are more likely to secure trust, consent and timely delivery. Community benefit is therefore not an optional add-on, but a central condition of making nationally necessary projects both legitimate and deliverable.

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