



Community engagement:

The business of building stronger places together

Learn invaluable insights from businesses about the clear benefits of engaging with the community.

Community engagement is often spoken about as a corporate responsibility, but the Community Pillar Roundtable, held at Dux Advisory, made clear that, at its best, it is much more human than that. It is about businesses recognising the communities they belong to, understanding the challenges people face, and using their skills, resources, networks and influence to help create better places to live and work.

The session, run by CSR-A in partnership with Buckinghamshire Business First, formed part of a wider exploration of the four pillars of CSR: environment, workplace, community and philanthropy. The first of these focused on the practical meaning of community engagement and how it connects with employee wellbeing, education, local prosperity, charity partnerships, skills development and long-term social value.

Guest speakers Shaun Brownsmith of Dux Advisory and Juliet Shayler of Wycombe Wanderers Foundation showed how authentic community engagement benefits everyone. Communities gain support, opportunity and connection. Employees gain pride, purpose and belonging. Businesses strengthen culture, reputation and local relationships.

Richard Collins, CEO and Co-founder of CSR Accreditation, opened the discussion by explaining that community engagement is about proactive outreach. It is the process by which organisations build relationships with the people, institutions and networks around them. This may include supporting local schools, helping charities, offering pro bono expertise, creating jobs, sponsoring community groups, providing volunteering opportunities, contributing to local economic development or simply giving time and attention to people who need support.

A key message was that many organisations are already doing far more than they realise. The challenge is often not starting from scratch, but identifying what is already happening, understanding its value, measuring impact where possible, and communicating that impact in a way that inspires others.

Doing the right thing, then measuring the difference

Shaun from Dux Advisory spoke about community engagement from the perspective of a business that has long supported local initiatives because it felt like the right thing to do. For his organisation,

community engagement was never originally about publicity. It grew from relationships, values and a desire to contribute.

Dux Advisory has supported charities, sports clubs, education initiatives, apprenticeships and young people entering the accountancy profession. Shaun explained how the CSR accreditation process helped the business move from instinctive good work to a more structured understanding of its impact. It encouraged the team to write things down, create a framework and set a baseline from which they could improve.

That structure matters because community activity can otherwise remain invisible, even within the organisation itself. Businesses may sponsor local teams, mentor students, provide work experience, offer career guidance, support fundraising, help charities or contribute professional skills without seeing those actions as part of a bigger social value story.

One example captured the emotional value of this work. Shaun spoke about an apprentice at Dux Advisory who also played for a rival football team to a local club supported by the firm. After a game, the apprentice proudly spoke to a player for the junior team supported by the firm about his employer and the support they provided. For Shaun, the importance of that moment was not commercial. It showed that the apprentice person felt proud of where he worked and connected to the organisation's values.

That sense of pride is one of the least tangible but most powerful outcomes of community engagement. It strengthens culture, builds loyalty and helps employees see their workplace as something more than a place of employment.

Meeting need through collaboration

Juliet from the Wycombe Wanderers Foundation offered the view from the other side: that of a community organisation working with businesses to deliver services, programmes and support across a wide range of needs.

The Foundation's work reaches people at every stage of life, from postnatal groups for mothers and babies through to dementia programmes and healthy ageing initiatives. It works in schools, supports children and families, delivers wellbeing sessions, promotes physical activity, helps older people facing isolation, and provides opportunities for young people who may be at risk of antisocial behaviour, homelessness or exclusion.

In one academic year, the Foundation supported 20 schools, delivered more than 2,000 sessions and provided more than 160 different experiences through the football club. The outcomes included improved wellbeing, greater confidence, more positive attitudes towards participation and stronger skills.

For businesses, the Foundation provides a route into meaningful community engagement. Some organisations sponsor specific programmes. Others provide volunteers, fund equipment, support events, or bring specialist skills into community settings. The key, Juliet explained, is understanding what a business wants to achieve and matching that with genuine community need.

That might mean sponsoring sensory equipment for children who struggle to settle and learn at school, funding girls' football clubs to build confidence through sport, supporting older people's

social activities, helping parents of children with additional needs access specialist advice, or contributing to programmes that give young people safe spaces and positive role models.

The Foundation's experience highlighted a crucial point: businesses do not always need to know exactly where to start. A good community partner can help them find practical, manageable and meaningful ways to get involved.

Storytelling, impact and the human case for engagement

A recurring theme throughout the session was the balance between data and storytelling. Measuring impact is important. Businesses need to understand whether their support is making a difference, and community organisations increasingly need evidence to secure funding, report to partners and demonstrate value.

But delegates also recognised that some of the most powerful outcomes are human stories that cannot always be captured in numbers.

It is important to note the recording of not only statistics but also stories: the older person who becomes less isolated, the child who builds confidence, the person who improves their wellbeing, or the family that finds support at the right time. These stories bring community engagement to life. They remind businesses that behind every programme are people with real needs, hopes and challenges.

Small teams can still make a big difference

One delegate raised an important question: how can a small organisation get started?

The response was encouraging. Community engagement does not have to begin with a major financial commitment or a large-scale programme. Small teams can volunteer for a few hours, support a local charity, offer professional skills, collect donations, sponsor an event, mentor young people or simply build a relationship with a nearby community group.

Another delegate noted that volunteering works best when organisations find charities that are genuinely set up to receive corporate help. Not every charity can accommodate a group of employees for a few hours, so part of the work is identifying the right match. This led to a practical discussion about mapping local charities, schools, councils, foundations and community organisations within a few miles of a business and asking what support they actually need.

Education, skills and the future workforce

Education and skills development emerged as one of the strongest areas of community engagement. Many of the organisations represented support schools, colleges, universities, apprenticeships, work experience placements, careers fairs and mentoring programmes.

Delegates discussed the value of helping young people understand different career paths, especially where there may be gaps between education and work readiness. Businesses can play a vital role by explaining what different professions involve, offering insight days, providing placements, supporting apprenticeships and giving young people the confidence to explore opportunities they may not otherwise have considered.

For accountancy and professional services firms, this can include going into schools to talk about apprenticeships, tax, finance, business skills and career routes. For others, it may mean supporting STEM workshops, employability programmes or enterprise initiatives.

Several organisations described apprenticeships as a full-circle opportunity. Young people join a business, develop their skills, then return to schools or colleges to speak to the next generation. This peer-to-peer element can be especially powerful because students often relate strongly to those who have recently been in their position.

Creating jobs is community engagement too

One of the most important reflections came near the end of the discussion: creating employment is itself a form of community engagement.

While community work is often associated with charity, volunteering or sponsorship, businesses also support communities by creating jobs, training people, generating income, supporting local suppliers and contributing to the local economy. Employment gives people stability, purpose and spending power. It helps local places thrive.

Businesses can create wealth locally, support regional economic development, provide career pathways, invest in apprenticeships and help people build long-term livelihoods. These are all meaningful contributions to community wellbeing.

Bringing employees with you

Community engagement should be a shared organisational responsibility. It should not sit only with a sustainability lead, marketing team, CSR manager or senior leader. The most effective engagement happens when employees understand it, contribute to it and feel part of it.

Encouraging staff to share what they are doing can help build momentum. With shared sensitively, these stories can inspire colleagues and demonstrate the organisation's values in action.

The power of local networks

The roundtable itself demonstrated one of the major benefits of community engagement: connection.

Representatives from different organisations discovered shared interests, overlapping relationships and opportunities for collaboration. Some were supporting schools, others charities, sports clubs, foundations, food banks, environmental projects or business networks. Together, they formed a picture of a local business community already making a considerable contribution.

Buckinghamshire Business First was recognised for its role in helping to connect organisations, support economic development, promote skills and strengthen the local business ecosystem. Other organisations spoke about sponsoring business events, supporting networking groups, working with colleges, donating furniture and equipment, engaging with local councils, supporting environmental initiatives and helping community groups with practical needs.

These networks matter because no single organisation can solve community challenges alone. Businesses, charities, schools, councils, foundations and local groups each hold part of the solution. Community engagement becomes more powerful when those parts are connected.

Summing up: purpose, empathy and impact

The roundtable showed that community engagement is not a single activity. It is a mindset, a relationship and a long-term commitment.

The benefits are wide-ranging. Communities gain support, skills, funding, services and opportunity. Employees gain pride, confidence, empathy and connection. Businesses strengthen their culture, reputation and local relationships. Young people gain insight into careers and pathways into work. Charities and foundations gain partners who can help them sustain and expand their impact.

Perhaps the strongest message was that community engagement should be authentic. It should not be done for bragging rights or as a compliance exercise. It should be rooted in purpose, aligned where possible with the skills and values of the organisation, and shaped by genuine community need.

Measurement matters, but stories matter too. Data can show scale, but lived experience shows meaning. Together, they help organisations understand the difference they are making and inspire others to get involved.

The session closed with thanks to the speakers, delegates and hosts, and with a clear sense that every organisation, whatever its size, has something valuable to offer. By engaging with their communities, businesses help build stronger, healthier and more cohesive places — not alone, but together.

Thanks to our guest speakers:

Shaun Brownsmith - Dux Advisory Limited

Juliet Shayler - Wycombe Wanderers Foundation

And to contributors:

Dave Kirby - Old Bill's Pest Control

Laura Monk - B P Collins LLP

Sam Kandiyali – Kopru

Suzanne Curry – Seymour Taylor

Phillipa Hatch – Blue Sheep

Nicola Cotton – Buckinghamshire Business First

The next CSR Roundtable Events

Workplace: 11th June at Seymour Taylor Accountants and Tax Advisers, High Wycombe

Environment: 9th July at Ercol Furniture Ltd, Princes Risborough

Philanthropy: 17th September at Chandler Garvey Ltd, High Wycombe

You can book your places here: <https://bbf.uk.com/events?keywords=csr+roundtable>