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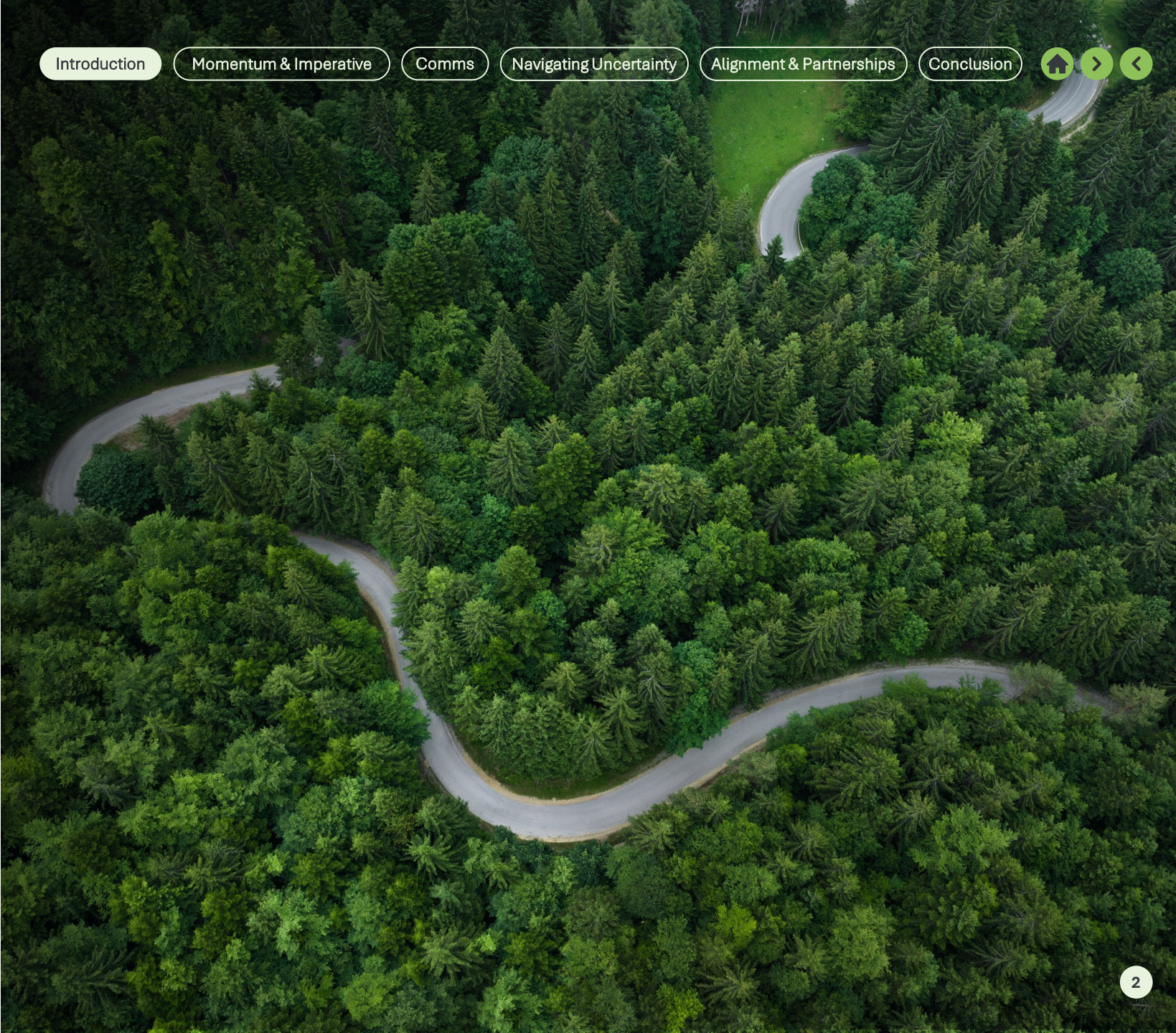
PROGRESS, NOT PERFECTION

Sustainability in the era of
transparency and action



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Executive summary: Transparency over perfection

Sustainability remains under the spotlight for many businesses. The pressure to communicate effectively - balancing the expectations of investors, employees, regulators, and the media - has only intensified. Today, stakeholders are looking for more than polished success stories. They expect an honest, unfiltered look at companies' entire sustainability journey.

This marks a fundamental shift. Transparency now matters more than perfection. Stakeholders want visibility into both progress and setbacks, recognising that real action and shared learning is what drives collective progress. In an era where environmental action is critical - and silence can be costly - companies cannot afford to step back from the conversation.

Looking ahead to 2026, the UK has a significant opportunity to lead the way on sustainability transparency. Even with a fragmented landscape and the definition of what "good" looks like still up for debate, UK businesses understand that open, authentic communication is essential. While some markets like the US are rowing back on their sustainability commitments, UK businesses are in fact doing the opposite - citing increased engagement than ever before. For UK businesses, sustainability remains a significant priority, with many being more vocal about it.

And the payoff is clear. Even when times are tough, clear, credible sustainability communication builds trust, wins respect, drives positive media coverage, and motivates employees. It strengthens both corporate reputation and commercial performance.

Companies looking to communicate their sustainability credentials should be open and realistic about where they are on their sustainability journeys - celebrating the wins, acknowledging the challenges, and committing to continuous improvement. They should communicate with both caution and confidence, making it clear that sustainability is an ongoing journey rather than a job to be 'done'.

As communicators, our role is to help brands earn trust through transparency, not perfection. To translate sustainability strategies into messaging and language that inspires and informs, help clients navigate reputational risks, and create platforms to share learnings, even when the broader landscape feels noisy and uncertain.

Now is the time to shape the sustainability conversation, not sit on the sidelines. Those who communicate with courage, clarity and transparency will lead the way.



The time is now

Now is the moment for businesses to rewrite the script for sustainability communications. Transparency is valued above perfection, so organisations need to tell their stories honestly and confidently - even when the journey is unfinished. This means:

Build emotional resonance.

Share both successes and setbacks, creating narratives that are relatable and engaging. Inviting stakeholders on the journey will help build trust and collective progress, turning audiences into active participants rather than passive observers.

Make the complex clear.

Anchor sustainability stories in real business priorities and evidence, moving beyond intent to highlight tangible action. By translating complex data and technical progress into clear, compelling messages, show what is truly being achieved and where there is more to do.

Embed authenticity and transparency.

In an era of heightened scrutiny, trust is earned by being honest about both achievements and challenges. Open communication signals leadership and a willingness to be held accountable.

Empower leaders and internal teams equally.

Giving internal champions and leadership the tools and confidence to communicate ensures consistency and credibility, with messages amplified both inside and outside an organisation.

Evolve the language of sustainability.

Move from buzzwords and aspirational jargon to clear, grounded language that highlights real progress and honest challenge. This will strengthen stakeholder trust and emphasize value, resilience, and business benefits over moral framing.

Stay agile.

Listen to stakeholder sentiment and feedback, adapting and evolving to fit cultural and economic contexts. Relevance and resonance depend on an ability to tune into what matters most, right now.

Momentum

The sustainability agenda continues to accelerate with UK businesses remaining vocal.



Momentum

UK companies are stepping up

Despite the global conversation around sustainability becoming more polarised, commitment from UK businesses is not just holding steady but gaining momentum.

Unlike in the US, where it has become a lightning rod for political debate, UK businesses recognise they need to continue to communicate about sustainability, often with greater conviction. In fact, two-thirds **(66%) report they are becoming more vocal about sustainability** as global debates intensify, refusing to let divisive narratives undermine progress.

Over the past three years, many UK businesses have even increased their internal and external communication on sustainability. The appetite for more transparency, more action, and more meaningful engagement is only accelerating. Rather than waiting for the global debate to calm, UK businesses are in fact stepping up and reshaping the sustainability narrative, demonstrating that progress is possible even in complex, politicised times.

Don't be afraid to lean in.

Despite increased polarisation, UK audiences expect more, not less, engagement on sustainability. Proactively communicate your sustainability commitments using transparency and dialogue to build trust and show continued leadership, even when the wider conversation is complex or contentious.

Momentum

External sustainability communication

To put it simply, **staying silent wasn't an option anymore.** Competitors were shouting about their sustainability progress, and we realised **if we didn't tell our story, someone else would shape the narrative for us**"

Director of Sustainability, Financial & Insurance Service Sector



Extent to which external sustainability communication has changed over the past three years



We communicate more about sustainability than we did 3 years ago



We communicate the same amount about sustainability as we did 3 years ago



We communicate less about sustainability than we did 3 years ago

What impact US rhetoric on sustainability has had on how businesses are communicating



Have already become more vocal about their work in the sustainability space



Are likely to become more vocal about sustainability in the future

Momentum


Internal sustainability communication

Extent to which internal sustainability communication has changed over the past 3 years



61%

We communicate more about sustainability than we did 3 years ago




38%

We communicate the same amount about sustainability as we did 3 years ago

1%

We communicate less about sustainability than we did 3 years ago



“Over the past few years, we’ve seen a noticeable **shift in expectations, not just from clients, but also from employees and stakeholders**. Sustainability is no longer seen as a 'nice to have', it’s become a **core part of how businesses are judged, both reputationally and commercially**.”

“Internally... it’s also **important for us culturally**. Younger team members, in particular, are really engaged with these issues, and we want to foster that awareness across the business.”

Director of Sustainability, Financial & Insurance Service Sector

Imperative

Sustainability today is a commercial imperative, with profit and growth a driving force behind it.

Imperative

Sustainability and business strategy go hand in hand

In the past, sustainability was largely regarded as a reputational issue. It is now recognised as a fundamental driver of business growth and commercial success. An overwhelming **87% of UK business report their sustainability efforts are driven by the pursuit of profit and growth**, not just a desire to “do good”. Today, sustainability and business strategy go hand in hand.

And the commercial impact is clear. Eight in ten business leaders (**80% believe that sustainability is viewed within their organisation as having a positive impact on the bottom line** – both now or in the future. And for most, this perception matches the reality on the ground, with nearly nine in ten (88%) agreeing that their sustainability efforts are already contributing to their bottom line.

For many, sustainability is no longer simply an add-on. **Half of UK leaders rank sustainability as one of the biggest strategic focus areas** for their organisation, perhaps surprisingly ahead of adapting to tech advancements like AI (45%) and cybersecurity (39%).

Put simply, sustainability is at the top of the UK business agenda. It is building resilience, opening up new opportunities and helping companies adapt in an ever-changing world.

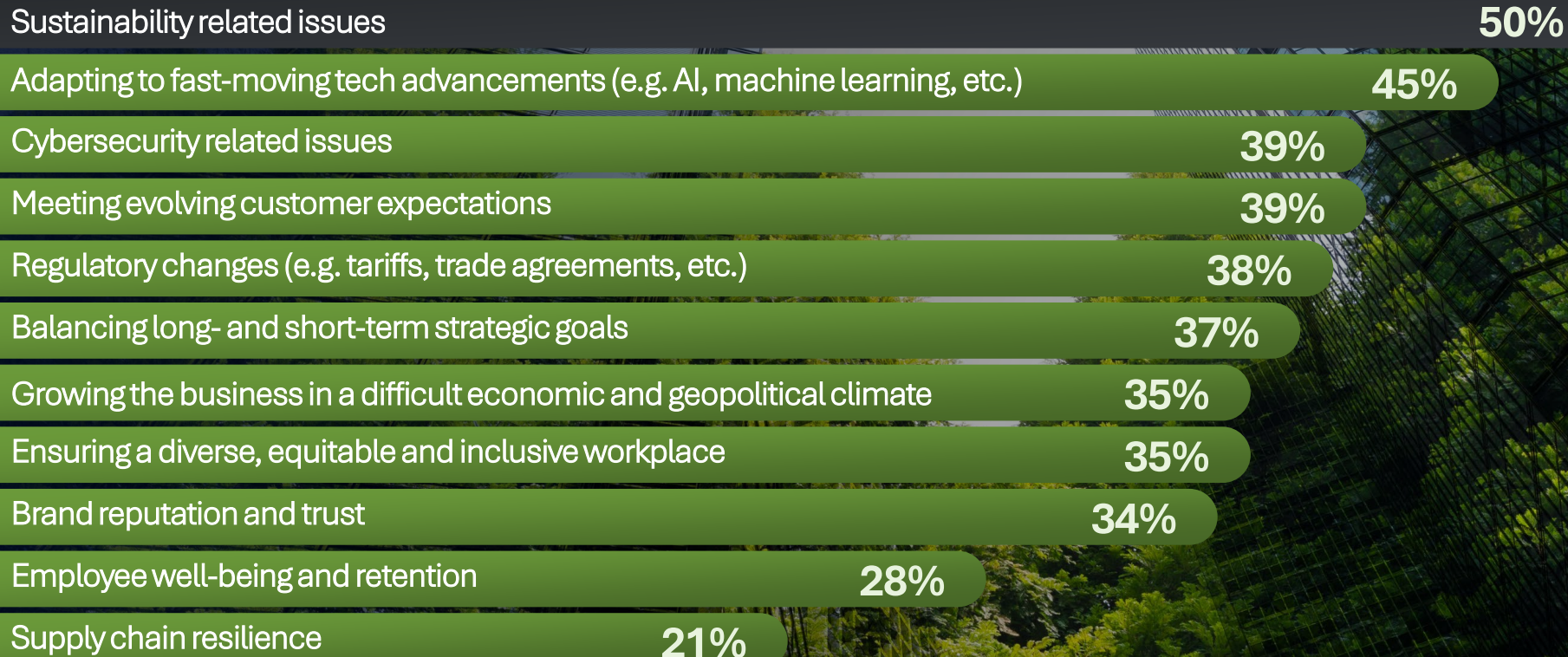
Frame sustainability as a growth story.

Connect sustainability to business outcomes. Highlight how sustainability initiatives drive profit, growth, and competitive advantage not just positive impact. Position your messaging to show that sustainability is a core business strategy, not a side project or add on.

Imperative

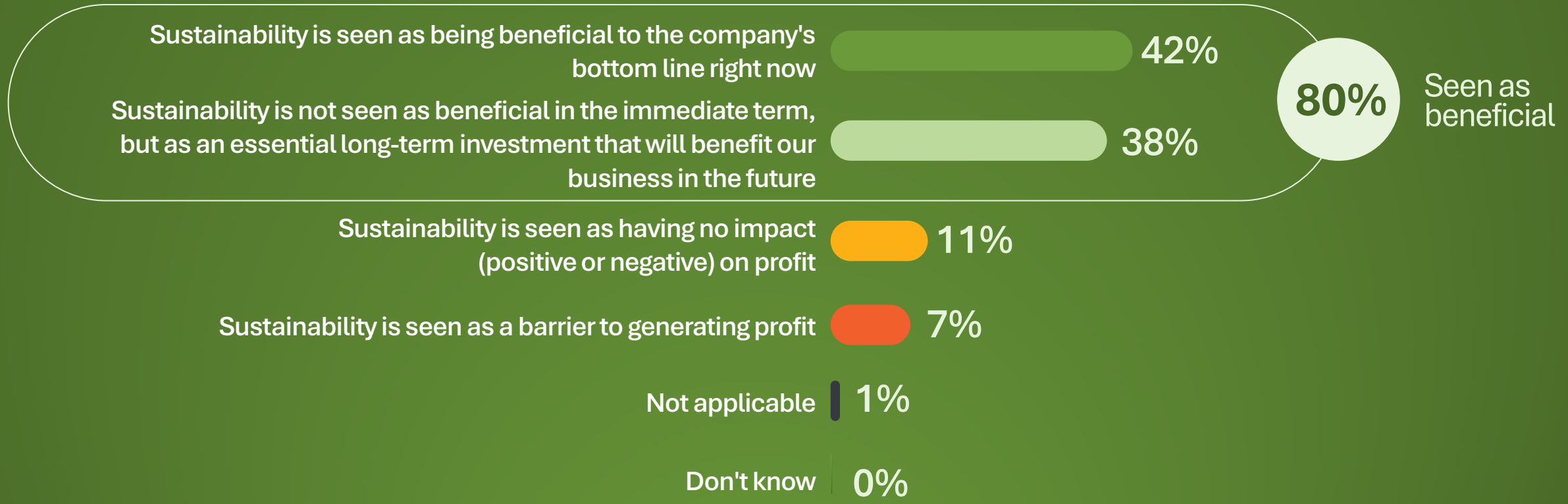
1 in 2 consider sustainability related issues a top business priority

Biggest priorities and challenges for business



Imperative

Sustainability is recognised as a fundamental driver of business growth



Communications

Investor (and other stakeholder) expectations are pushing UK businesses to make sustainability a strategic priority.



Communications

Stakeholder scrutiny is rising

Investor influence is becoming even more of a defining force in shaping the UK sustainability agenda. In the last year alone, **78% of business leaders have seen a notable increase in investor scrutiny** of their sustainability credentials and commitments. Looking at the longer-term trend, 66% report that investors are now more influential on their company's sustainability agenda than they were three years ago. Sustainability is now front and centre in how companies are evaluated and judged by investors.

This heightened scrutiny means investors are not just asking questions but are steering the conversation. Nearly half of UK business leaders (49%) now see investors as one of their most influential audiences when it comes to sustainability.

And it's not just investors raising the bar. Broader stakeholder pressure is also on the rise, with **53% of businesses saying expectations on all sides have increased over the past three years.**

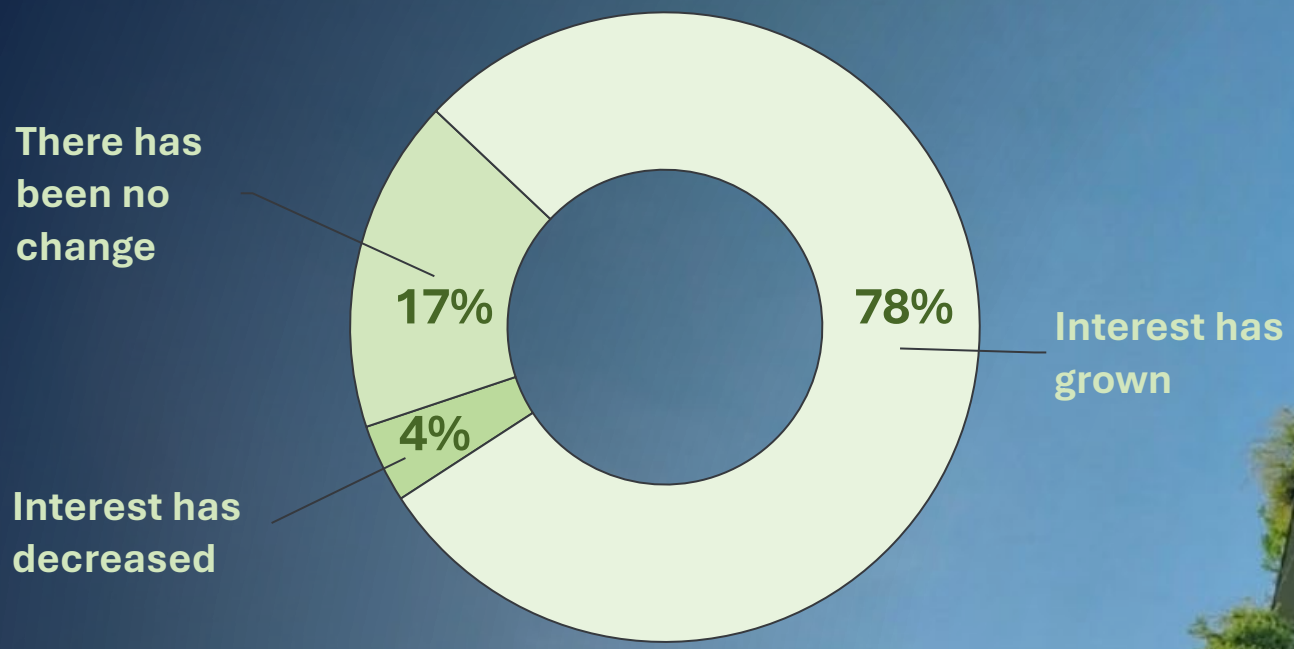
These days, sustainability performance is under the microscope, and delivering on investor expectations has become a board-level priority. This is pushing organisations to raise their game, embed sustainability deeper into their core business strategy, and to communicate progress with greater clarity and conviction.

Translate investor expectations into trusted narratives.

Clearly demonstrate how your sustainability actions and outcomes align with investor priorities. Use transparent, evidence-based messaging to show progress, build confidence, and position your business as future-ready.

Communications

Investor interest in sustainability has increased over the past 12 months



Communications

Transparent communication is critical to sustainability leadership, but caution is rising.

Communications

Balancing risk with opportunity

Open, honest communication is now a cornerstone of UK sustainability leadership. Close to nine out of ten business leaders agree clear and transparent sustainability communication is essential for building trust with stakeholders.

For many, this imperative for openness feels unsettling. Three out of four leaders worry a communication misstep could seriously damage their business. **Nearly half (47%) say it's harder to speak publicly about sustainability than it was just a few years ago, and 40% say it feels risky.**

Part of this challenge lies in finding the right language, moving away from buzzwords, aspirational jargon, empty or lofty promises, to communicate real progress, with all the challenges and learnings it brings. As the conversation matures, clarity and authenticity are more important than ever.

Despite the concerns for risk, most UK businesses recognise the need to continue communicating. As cited earlier, the vast majority of businesses are communicating about sustainability externally the same amount, or more compared to three years ago. Only 1% say they are communicating less (see page 7).

For UK leaders, the benefits of communicating on sustainability outweigh the risks. They know that staying silent isn't an option – if you want to lead, you need to speak up.

Communicate progress, not perfection.

Don't let fear of missteps silence you. Build trust by sharing your sustainability journey openly, including challenges as well as successes. Clear, honest communication demonstrates leadership and resilience, even in a cautious climate. It isn't just about doing good anymore, it's about doing well.

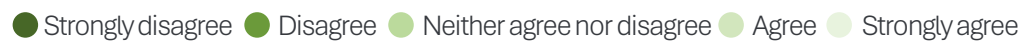
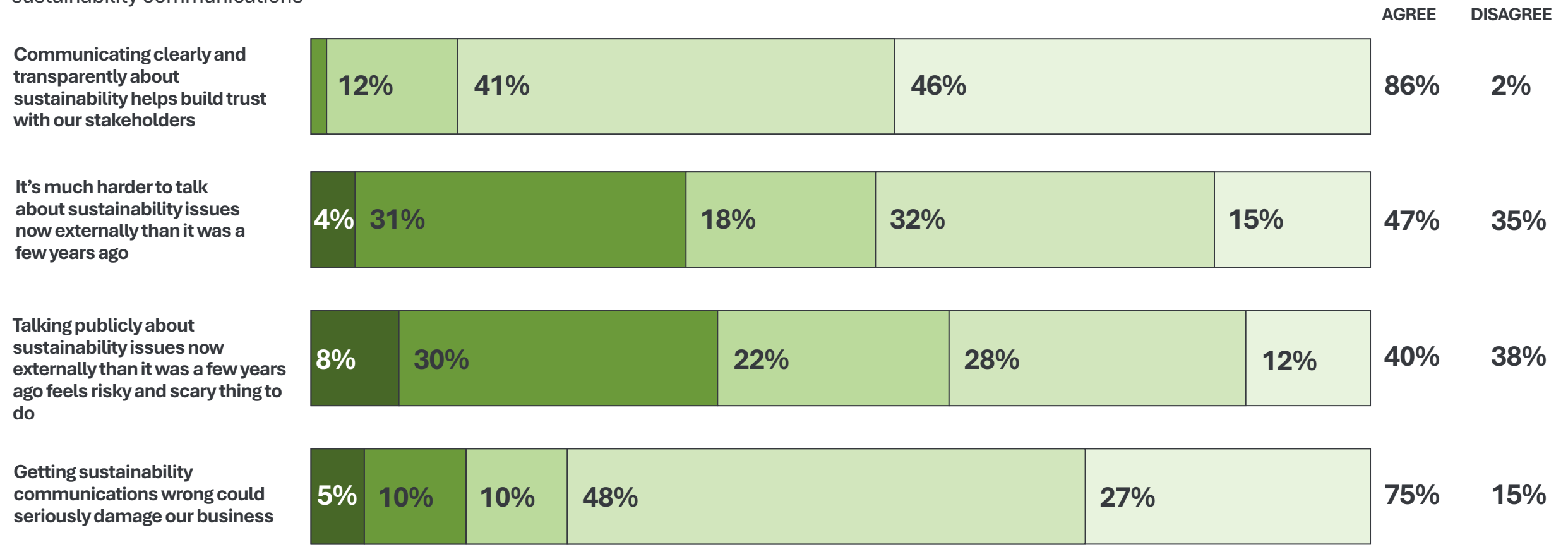


“We recognize **that transparency is essential to building trust**, so we are more proactive in sharing our sustainability progress and challenges.”

VP of Climate Strategy, Manufacturing

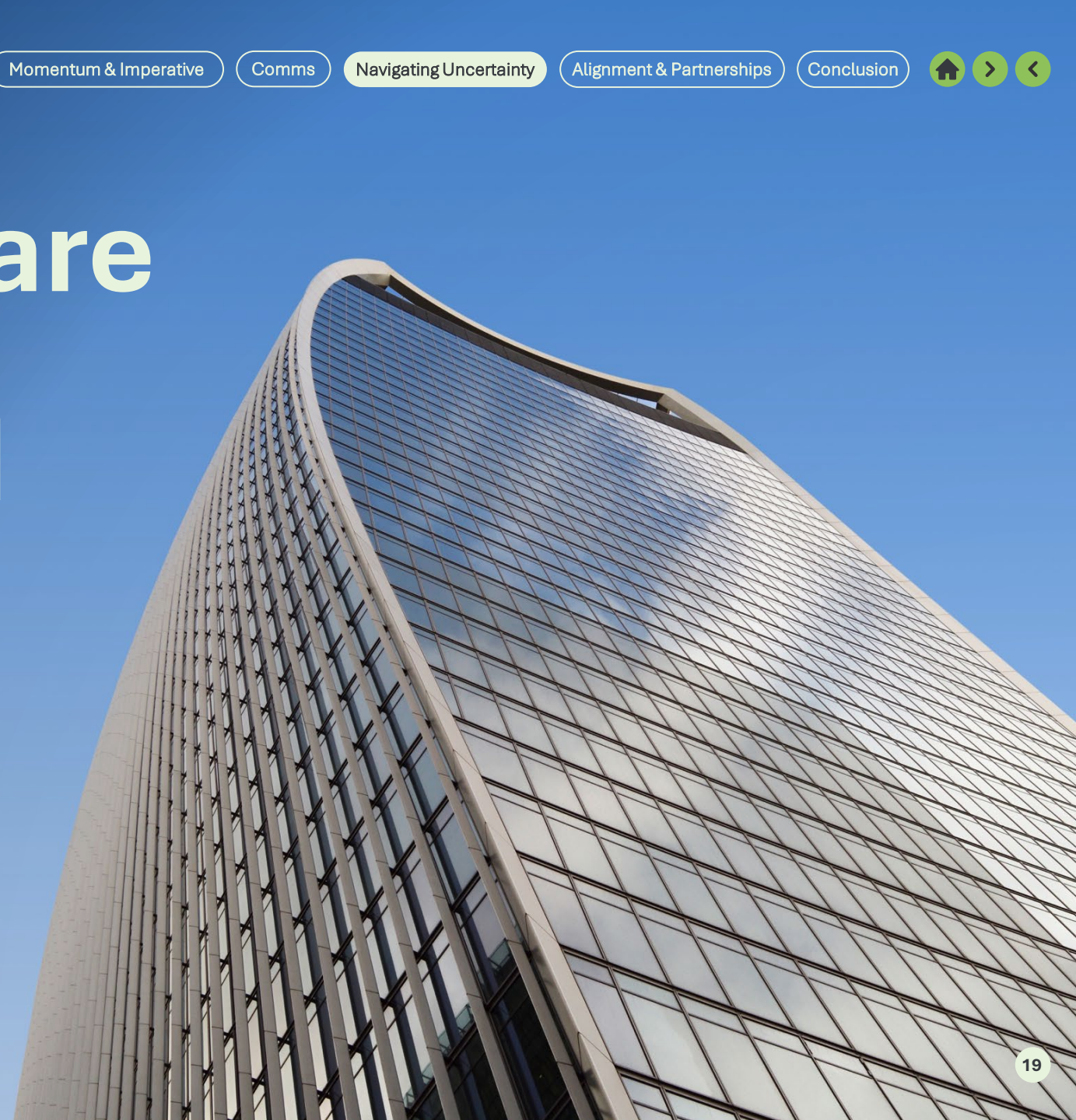
Communications

Business leaders' views on the risks and opportunities of sustainability communications



Navigating Uncertainty

UK businesses are navigating a fragmented and uncertain sustainability landscape.



Navigating Uncertainty

A lack of sustainability leadership presents a clear opportunity

It's no secret that the sustainability landscape is challenging. Business leaders agree goalposts are continually moving – **nearly 8 out of 10 say “what good looks like” in sustainability is constantly changing.** With no fixed standards, it's tough to know if you're moving in the right direction.

The landscape itself has also become more scattered and decentralised. Over half (54%) of leaders report that their own sustainability efforts are increasingly fragmented, while 53% say the overall environment is more decentralised than it used to be. With so many different frameworks, regulations, and initiatives organisations are finding it harder to navigate and align their strategies.

A majority (55%) say that no single entity is leading the sustainability agenda, while nearly half (45%) are uncertain about who to listen to amid the crowded field of voices.

Governments, NGOs, scientists, investors, and other stakeholders all contribute to the conversation, but the result is a noisy and sometimes contradictory or confusing landscape.

In this fast-moving and crowded space, clarity and adaptability are essential. Businesses are tasked with cutting through the noise to define what matters most for them, while staying agile as things shift around them.

Cut through the noise with clarity and consistency.

In a crowded and fast-changing landscape, establish your own clear narrative. Anchor your sustainability communications in your organisation's values and evidence and communicate consistently even when external headwinds may be shifting.

Navigating Uncertainty

No single organisation or platform is seen as being significantly more or less visible in driving the sustainability agenda for business

	Very influential	Fairly influential	Influential (NET: <i>Very influential / Fairly influential</i>)	A little influential	Not at all influential
World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)	47%	39%	86%	12%	0%
The United Nations & key UN agencies e.g. UNEP, UNESCO etc.	44%	46%	90%	8%	1%
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)	43%	46%	89%	8%	2%
Conference of the Parties (COP)	42%	46%	88%	11%	0%
European Union (EU)	42%	48%	90%	9%	0%
World Trade Organisation (WTO)	41%	46%	86%	11%	2%
NGOs such as WWF, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace etc.	40%	45%	85%	13%	2%
World Economic Forum (WEF)	37%	48%	86%	13%	1%

Alignment

Internal alignment on sustainability remains a challenge.



Alignment

Boardroom enthusiasm for sustainability communications isn't universal

Real sustainability leadership starts from the inside out. For many UK businesses though, internal alignment is still a sticking point.

Nearly half (44%) of leaders report a lack of consensus among their executive teams on sustainability priorities, making it difficult to move forward in a unified direction. Dig a little deeper and it's clear why - **39% admit their leadership can't define what sustainability means for their business**, resulting in vague, or inconsistent goals and commitments.

And this lack of clarity is having real consequences. As sustainability climbs higher up the business agenda, 41% acknowledge that it's getting harder to make their fellow leaders care. Without a unified front and clear direction, even the strongest messages risk being undermined by confusion or apathy behind the scenes.

But here's the good news – when companies align internally, the benefits are far-reaching: greater employee trust, stronger shareholder interest, faster innovation, and better partnerships. Each of these outcomes is powerful on its own but together can unlock business value and create longer term success.

Build internal alignment before you go external.

Bring leaders together around a clear, shared definition of sustainability. Facilitate open conversations, address misunderstandings, and ensure your internal narrative is unified, to ensure external messaging is credible, consistent, and backed by genuine commitment.

Alignment

Business leaders' opinions of sustainability strategy in the boardroom

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree
It's becoming harder to make business leaders care about the sustainability agenda	7%	36%	16%	26%	15%	41%	43%
There's a lack of consensus amongst leaders in my business on the sustainability agenda and how to address it	9%	28%	18%	30%	14%	44%	38%
Business leaders don't know how to define sustainability, leading to unclear objectives	6%	33%	22%	48%	13%	39%	40%

Partnerships

Looking ahead,
technology and
partnerships will
be key to driving
sustainability
change.

Partnerships

UK business leaders recognise the future of sustainability will be shaped by bold innovation and deeper collaboration.

As you would expect, **89% see technological advances already making a positive difference**. AI has the potential to be a game-changer, enabling smarter data analysis, streamlined reporting, and more effective solutions to complex environmental challenges. Its no surprise then that 9 in 10 (91%) think it will positively impact their sustainability efforts.

But technology alone isn't the answer. Real, lasting progress will also depend on openness and partnership. **Nearly half (48%) of leaders say collaboration will be key** and almost just as many **(44%) point to the power of transparency and data-sharing to break down silos and drive collective action**. The appetite for peer learning is growing, with many advocating for shared standards and even teaming up with unexpected partners to deliver real, systems wide change.

Working on sustainability in isolation is becoming a thing of the past. Businesses need to embrace new ideas, invite collaboration, and demonstrate their willingness to learn and adapt as they go.

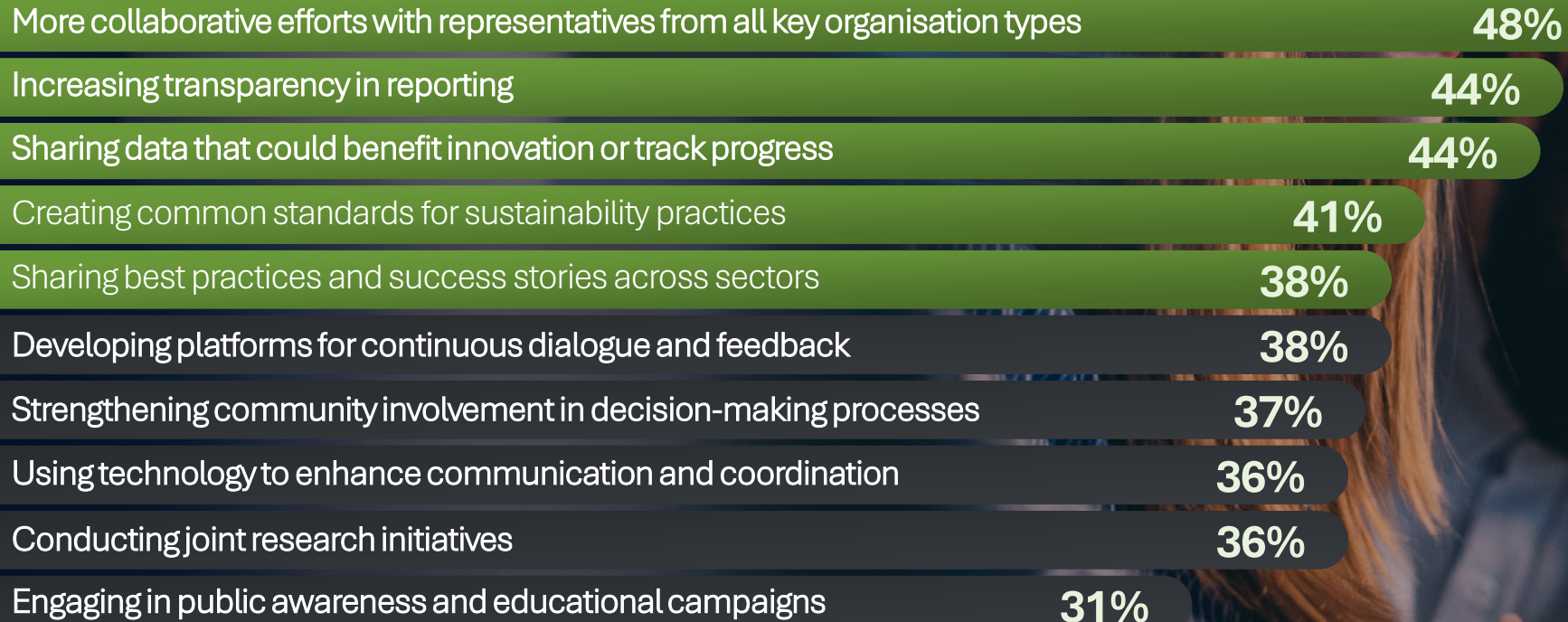
Champion innovation and foster partnerships.

Highlight how your organisation is embracing new technologies and building collaborative relationships. Position your sustainability narrative around openness - sharing data, learnings, and successes - to demonstrate leadership and inspire collective progress.

Partnerships

Greater collaboration and data sharing is key for driving systemic change

Actions organisations are taking to drive change



In Conclusion...



Conclusion

Lead with openness in an era of transparency and action

Sustainability may once have felt like a side project. It's now central to business strategy, reputation, and growth. Today, leadership means being ready to share progress honestly, even when the journey is imperfect and the risks feel real.

It's smart to be cautious about what you say, but it shouldn't silence the conversation. If leaders want to stand out, they'll need to bring stakeholders along with them - openly sharing achievements and challenges alike, while making it clear that progress is ongoing.

Transparency is still your best defence - against greenwashing, public criticism or wider environmental concerns. By owning your whole story - both successes and setbacks - you can build trust, even when scrutiny gets tough.

Sustainability communicators and leaders should look to lead the conversation with clarity, courage, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Now is the time to step up, speak out and bringing others along with you.

“Over the last three years, sustainability has increasingly become a **central concern for our clients, investors, and other stakeholders**. We recognised that **transparent communication is vital to meeting their expectations**. By aligning our external messaging with our sustainability goals, we're **demonstrating accountability and leadership**, which in turn builds trust and **strengthens our brand reputation**.”

Head of ESG, Financial & Insurance Services



Conclusion

About the authors



Holly Rouse

Partner, Corporate & Sustainability

As co-lead of FleishmanHillard's Climate & Sustainability Unit, Holly specializes in corporate communications, stakeholder engagement, and purpose-driven programmes designed to help organisations shape their reputations and drive meaningful change across diverse audiences.

She has extensive experience leading major ESG campaigns, crafting compelling sustainability narratives and strategies,

and protecting and enhancing industry reputations on critical sustainability issues.

Her work has supported organisations in a board range of sectors including healthcare, FMGC, automotive, and more.

Holly holds a certificate in Business Sustainability Management from the Cambridge Institute for Sustainable Leadership.



Kirsty Mair

Director, Corporate & Sustainability

As a senior corporate affairs consultant, Kirsty works with companies big and small on strategies to build and protect their reputation. Sustainability communications sit at the heart of this work, connecting company stories with the audiences that matter, helping build stakeholder trust, media attention and employee engagement.

Kirsty's work in the sustainability space includes narrative development, stakeholder and competitor mapping, media relations strategy, B2B and B2C content development and talent engagement communications. Work that is helping clients from the comms team to the C-suite navigate the many complicated and interconnected elements within the sustainability agenda.

Methodology

A woman with dark curly hair, wearing a brown and white striped button-down shirt and grey trousers, is smiling and gesturing with her hands while holding a black tablet. She is standing in a meeting room, with the backs of two other people's heads visible in the foreground, suggesting she is addressing a group.

Research methodology:

- 15-minute online survey with 250 business leaders in the UK
- Job titles: CSO / VP / Director of Sustainability, Marketing or Communications across multiple sectors
- Business size: At least 250+ employees
- Revenue: £5m+



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