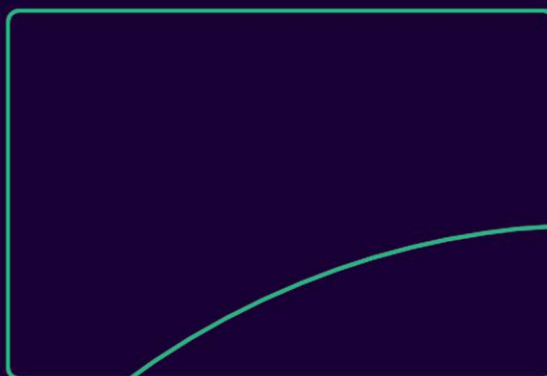




**Newbridge**  
Advisors

## **RESOURCING THE SOCIAL HOMES OF THE FUTURE**

A report on sustainability resourcing within  
registered providers of social housing in the UK



June 2026

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## Foreword

Welcome to Newbridge's report on sustainability resourcing within the social housing sector.

Sustainability is, and has always been, a key tenet of the social housing sector's purpose. Bringing together topics from energy efficiency and net zero through to placemaking and resident support, it continues to shape organisational strategy, investment decisions and delivery across the sector. As Chair of Sustainability for Housing ("SfH"), the body that oversees the Sustainability Reporting Standard for Social Housing ("SRS"), I have seen firsthand that the organisations prioritising sustainability tend to be the strongest, carefully balancing financial viability with real-world impact.

While public sentiment toward Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) matters has become increasingly politicised over the past few years, the underlying importance of sustainability has not wavered. In fact, with Government pushing housing associations to reach EPC C by 2030, improve health and safety standards and build more energy efficient social homes, sustainability has arguably never been under such a spotlight.

The success of any sustainability strategy ultimately depends on people and organisational capacity. As ESG considerations continue to evolve, building the right organisational capability is essential. The findings within this report provide an important opportunity to examine how housing associations are organising themselves and preparing for the next few decades of delivery.

Newbridge's research demonstrates that, despite competing priorities, sustainability remains a significant area of focus across the sector. Many organisations have established dedicated sustainability functions, while others are embedding sustainability responsibilities across wider teams and organisational structures. Although approaches differ, there is a clear recognition that sustainability requires coordination, leadership and accountability.

One of the most encouraging findings from this report is the extent to which organisations are continuing to invest in the governance and capability needed to support long-term sustainability objectives. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported having a central sustainability function, while the vast majority indicated that sustainability has executive sponsorship and oversight. This reflects an increasing understanding that sustainability is not solely an operational issue, but a strategic consideration that influences decision-making across the organisation.

The research also highlights the evolution of sustainability roles within housing associations. While reporting remains a core responsibility, sustainability teams are increasingly contributing to organisational strategy, risk management, planning, partnership development and horizon scanning. These findings demonstrate that

sustainability is becoming more integrated into overall business planning and organisational resilience.

Importantly, the report demonstrates that there is no single model for success. Sustainability teams ranged from individual specialists through to larger multidisciplinary functions, reflecting differences in organisational size, priorities and resources. Yet despite this diversity, there was remarkable consistency in how participants described the core purpose of sustainability functions. The need for expertise, coordination, strategic insight and the ability to support colleagues across the organisation emerged repeatedly throughout the research.

Another theme running throughout the research is the importance of collaboration. Housing associations have a strong track record of sharing learning and working collectively to address common challenges. The report identifies significant opportunities to build on this further and emphasises that organisations of all sizes can draw upon sector-wide knowledge and insights to meet future sustainability challenges.

This research from Newbridge moves the conversation beyond what housing associations *should be doing* and explores *how they can deliver* in practice.

I would like to thank Newbridge Advisors for undertaking this work and all the organisations and individuals who contributed their time and insight. Although many challenges lie ahead, I remain confident that with the right people and structures in place, the social housing sector will continue to deliver on its sustainability objectives in the years and decades to come.

**Piers Williamson**

Chair

Sustainability for Housing

## Introduction

Newbridge Advisors is a specialist advisory firm working in social housing, sustainability, infrastructure and regeneration. We work with local authorities and social landlords on projects ranging from strategy through to implementation. This includes an end-to-end service in sustainability and impact spanning strategy setting, through to delivery, reporting and assurance. To find out more about our services, please see [here](#).

Following on from a research project looking at the use of Sustainability Linked Loans (“SLLs”) in social housing in 2025, Newbridge have carried out further research this year, focusing on sustainability resourcing in the sector.

Similar to SLLs, this was inspired by anecdotal evidence that perspectives of sustainability were shifting in the sector, leading to variances in how housing associations were staffing in turn. We wanted to test this and provide associations with an evidenced framework of reference.

This research aimed to quantify the number of people working in sustainability in housing associations, understand what the expectations were of them and set out general trends. We also set out our ambition to develop a framework of different options for housing associations who are considering future plans to ensure continuity and responsiveness to emerging needs.

This project was carried out using surveys and focus groups, as well as desk-based analysis. A total of 30 housing associations took part in a variety of forms with 43 responses to the survey, five associations shared job specifications and 14 participants in focus groups. We are also grateful to Sustainability for Housing for their views.

A more detailed methodology is set out in the research findings.

This work shows that sustainability is still a priority for housing associations, though it is competing with other demands. While some associations have undeniably slowed down efforts in this space, others are just starting, with an eye on the 2030 target.

As fuel poverty, the effects of extreme weather and increasing shortages of resources continue to dominate both the global and domestic agendas, we can expect that this will continue to occupy both businesses and public service providers. As both, housing associations will need to stand ready to respond. So will those in the wider social housing space, including local authorities. We hope that this report will be used as an evidence base to build the right structures and develop the right people in service of that aim.

## Executive summary

While net zero and sustainability have faced criticism from some commentators, the findings of this research indicate that sustainability continues to gain momentum within housing associations. Multiple respondents pointed to regulatory pressures and retrofit as reasons why sustainability had climbed up the internal agenda. Others spoke of climate risks and extreme weather. Overall, sector trends also reflect housing associations who may only have started embarking on their sustainability journeys recently.

62% of respondents to our research said they had a central sustainability team. Occasionally, teams within the same organisations gave us different responses or didn't know, indicating that figure is higher. All our participants in the research agreed that all housing associations should have such a centralised function, as where there wasn't one, the work was not adequately coordinated.

Sustainability team numbers ranged from 1 person to 20 people strong teams. This will look different depending on the size of the organisation and their strategy, but at a minimum this function should include at least one named individual with clear responsibility for sustainability.

Current sustainability teams sit in varied functions, reflecting the impetus for their set up. As a result, responsibilities significantly varied. All associations however were doing some form of sustainability, ESG or impact reporting. Most were also engaged in colleague engagement. An analysis of job descriptions also showed a focus on external partnerships, data and horizon scanning.

Through assessing the findings of this research, we suggest that all sustainability functions should be responsible for the following activities as a minimum in the short-term:

- 1) Sustainability-related expertise, including teaching others internally
- 2) Planning and horizon scanning
- 3) Coordination and partnerships.

In the medium to longer-term, sustainability functions should be able to deal with:

- 1) Reporting
- 2) Strategy
- 3) Risk and resilience
- 4) Act as a trusted advisor and enabler of others in the organisation.

We propose that sustainability functions should sit centrally, notwithstanding specific responsibilities for specific teams. Depending on the organisation, this could be with strategy, corporate or the Chief Executive's office. Sustainability requires concerted

actions across the organisation and therefore needs buy-in from the entire organisation. Sitting centrally enables them to corral the wider organisation and act on a bigger remit.

Most sustainability teams (89%) had Executive sponsorship and representation on governance committees (89%). If the individual tasked with the lead on sustainability is not an Executive member themselves, there must be Executive level sponsorship. Those feeding into the research felt it was imperative that this should be someone who could hold others accountable through the nature of their role. This Executive member must also be willing and able to take on the role of influencing and challenging their peer group.

There was a clear desire that there must be consequences where targets are not met.

Current sustainability teams have huge variances in budget – while it is difficult to set a single number as this will change based on size and requirements, as a principle, sustainability functions must be given the budget to in order to succeed on the organisation’s sustainability strategy. This includes paying for expertise where the organisation cannot resource the requirements itself.

In organisations looking to take the next step, shared decision making over bigger budgets such as the asset management team’s retrofit budgets, would be the next logical step to enable true collaboration and accountability.

For organisations of all sizes, there is unrealised potential in partnering with others in the sector. The outcomes are particularly pertinent for smaller organisations who may not have the economies of scale or resources to unlock research and innovation on their own. This could include shared resources between housing associations and joint procurement opportunities including pooled consultancy budgets. At a minimum, bigger associations with large teams should be openly sharing information and learnings where applicable.

## Our research

To reach the maximum number of people working in housing associations, this research was carried out using both surveys and focus groups.

The surveys were developed in conjunction with the Sustainable Housing Strategy Group, a social housing based sustainability network. It was disseminated widely to encourage as many people as possible to respond, including through:

- The Sustainable Housing Strategy Group
- Sustainability for Housing who administer the Sustainability Reporting Standard for the social housing sector in the UK
- Newbridge Advisors to our own client lists.

The surveys focused on baseline comparable data looking at numbers of people, roles and structures.

We had also asked if housing associations would share job specifications in sustainability teams to evidence the findings of the survey. Five associations shared this information which has also been analysed and presented here.

The focus groups were intended to build on the survey results, drilling down into the rationale behind designing teams or sustainability functions in the way they had been, and developing the framework for use by housing associations regardless of where they are on the journey.

A total of 30 housing associations took part in a variety of forms with 43 responses to the survey and 14 participants in focus groups.

## Surveys

43 people from 30 housing associations responded to the online surveys, run via *SurveyMonkey*.

Between them they represented:

- Six smaller housing associations with portfolios of under 10,000 homes owned or under management (“units”)
- Seven mid-sized housing associations with portfolios between 10,000 – 30,000 units
- Five large housing associations with portfolios between 30,000 – 50,000 units
- Twelve very large associations with portfolios in excess of 50,000 units.

No housing associations with stock under 1,000 units were represented.

The housing associations operated across the UK. Although no Scotland domiciled housing association responded, associations who operated in Scotland in addition to England, did.

Respondents represented different parts of their respective organisations with:

- 19% working in Executive teams
- 29% working in sustainability
- 33% representing finance
- 7% in asset management
- 1% in development
- 11% in other teams such as strategy, health and safety or procurement.

80% of respondents said their organisation had an ESG or sustainability strategy, 85% said they reported against the SRS and 64% had sustainability-linked financing. Similar to other findings, some respondents from the same organisation sometimes disagreed with each other on this front evidencing a general lack of internal knowledge around sustainability matters.

### Key findings

- 62% have a centralised function, vast majority is a single team
- Number of people in central teams ranges from 1 to 20, with 3 and 7 being the most popular
- Diversity in where teams sit, mostly asset management
- Diversity in roles, just over 30% have non-sustainability responsibilities in addition
- Most sustainability roles outside the central team relate to retrofit
- Wide divergence in sustainability objectives outside of that
- Coordination primarily through meetings, i.e. working groups
- Vast divergence in budgets and consultant spend.

### Central sustainability functions

62% who answered said their organisation did have a centralised sustainability or environmental management function. 36% said their organisation did not and the rest did not know. In cases where multiple people from a singular organisation had responded, sometimes this answer had varied, suggesting the profile of central sustainability teams weren't always as prominent as the function might require.

The vast majority of those who had a centralised function had one team (92%). Two organisations indicated they had two teams split between sustainability and energy management.

The number of people working in the teams ranged from 1 to 20 members of staff.

Number of people in team	Number of organisations responding
1	3

2	3
3	6
4	2
6	1
7	5
13	1
14	1
18	1
20	1

As demonstrated below, there was real diversity in where teams sat, though the single most prominent answer was within asset management.

**Figure 1**

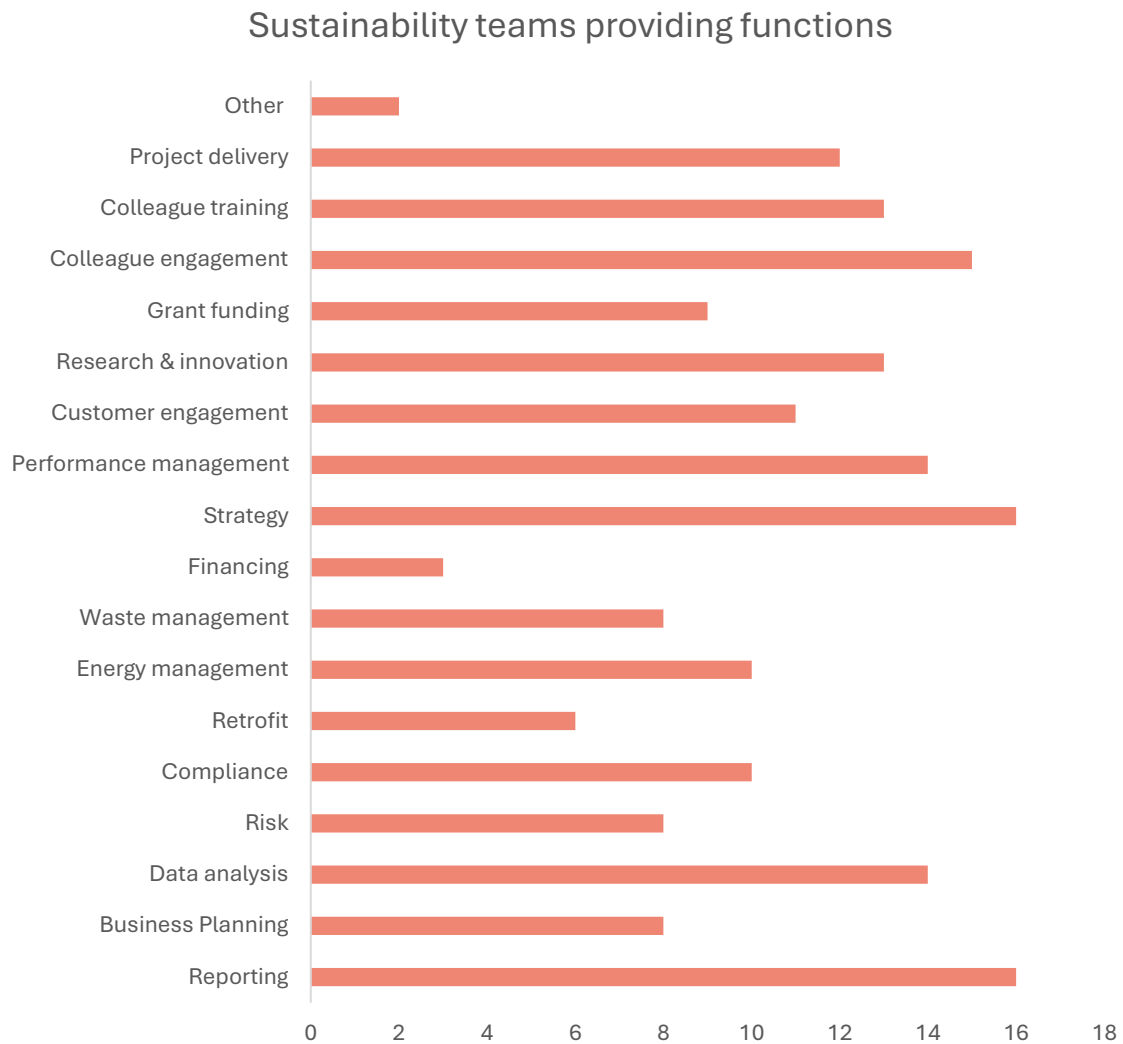


There was also breadth and diversity in what sustainability teams did, reflecting where within the organisation they operated from. There was a single core theme across all types housing associations and structures of teams: reporting. All participants had ESG or sustainability reporting reflected within their remits. Colleague engagement also scored highly, regardless of the type of team, perhaps showing reliance on others to get things done.

Although strategy scored as highly as reporting, this was less prevalent in operational teams.

Teams in asset management all had responsibility for retrofit programmes and all operational teams had more of a focus on delivery.

**Figure 2**



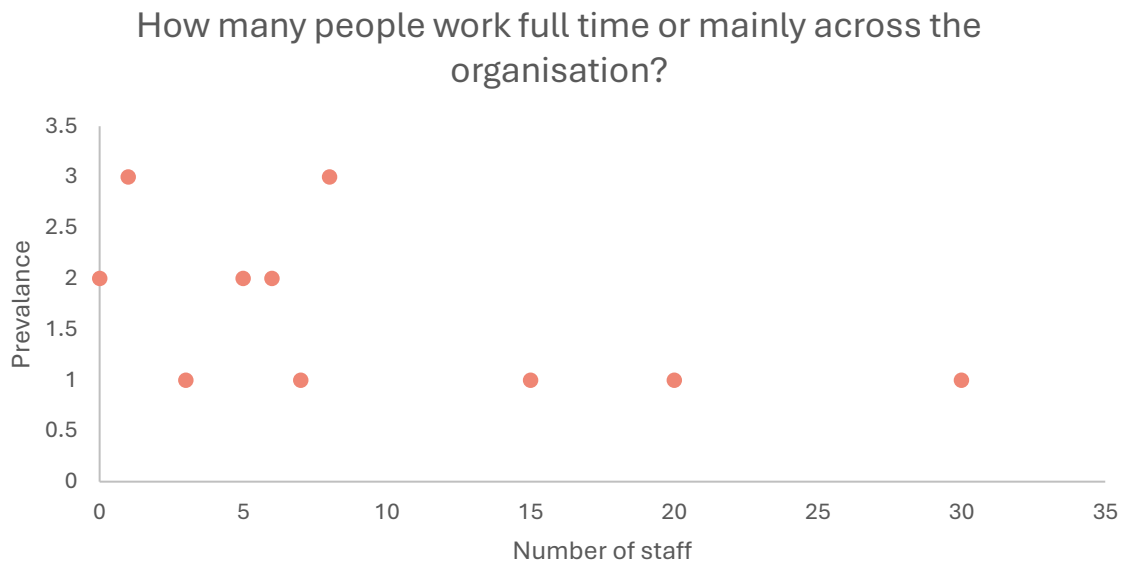
Many teams were doing a lot of roles concurrently.

32% had additional responsibilities on top of sustainability – these teams overwhelmingly sat with assets management, although a couple of others also stated this, notably in risk and in communications.

#### Support within organisation

We asked a series of questions about people who worked on sustainability across the organisation outside of the central teams to establish how widespread responsibilities and delivery were.

**Figure 3**



There tended to be lower numbers of people outside of the central teams who were mostly working on sustainability, with the exception of some outliers.

These teams primarily worked on asset decarbonisation or retrofit. Some other answers mentioned were procurement, data analysis, social value, finance and new build design.

We had also asked how many people worked on sustainability on a partial basis. Answers for this varied from no people to the whole organisation, reflecting different stages of maturity and possibly different characterisations of “sustainability”.

**Figure 4**

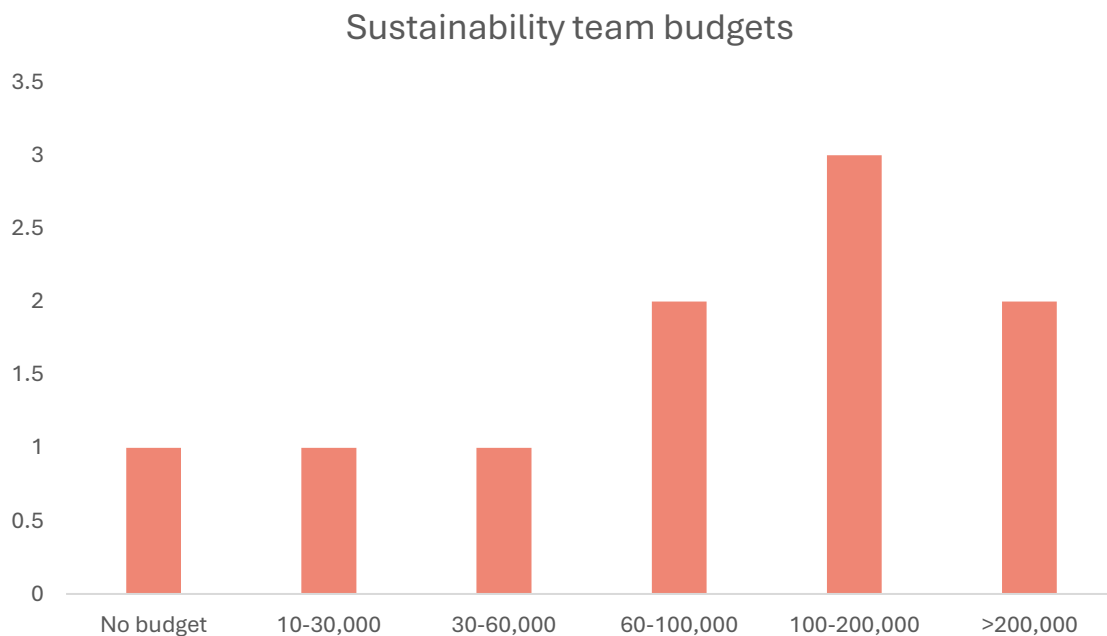
**How does the sustainability team coordinate work with those working outside of the central team?**



When asked how work was coordinated with those working on sustainability outside of a central function, the vast majority of answers referred to some form of working group at varying levels of seniority. Many responses also referred to progress trackers or documentation underpinning the work. Two housing associations mentioned the idea of “business partners” or dedicated leads within a sustainability team who worked with, or were embedded in, key teams outside of it.

A number of responses responded with their assessment of how well coordination was managed within their organisations with one respondent stating “with difficulty” and another “not well”.

**Figure 5**



Most respondents declined to answer when asked about budgets. For those who answered, responses varied from £0- 1million. Size of the organisation did not appear to have had an impact here, but a greater influence was where the team sat within the organisation. Assets teams had significantly bigger budgets on average.



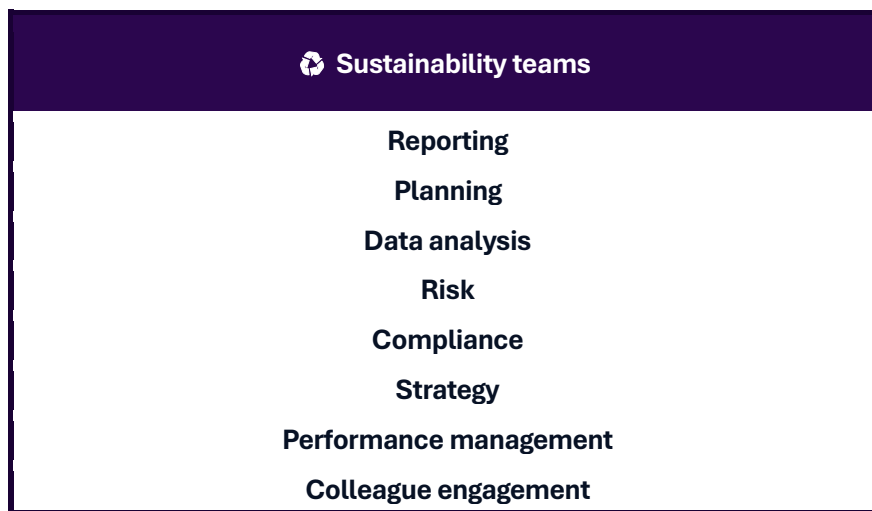
**89% had an Executive Sponsor**



**89% represented on governance groups**

### Split sustainability functions

Where respondents had indicated that sustainability was split between two teams, the sustainability teams were consistently responsible for:



Environmental management teams varied in size between 1-6 people and all had the following responsibilities:



### No central sustainability function

These organisations saw a similar spread of numbers of people working full time or part time on sustainability regardless of the existence of centralised functions. The only material difference in comparison to organisations with sustainability teams, was that none of these organisations had said either that no people were working on sustainability, or conversely, that all were.

**“It’s not coordinated”.**

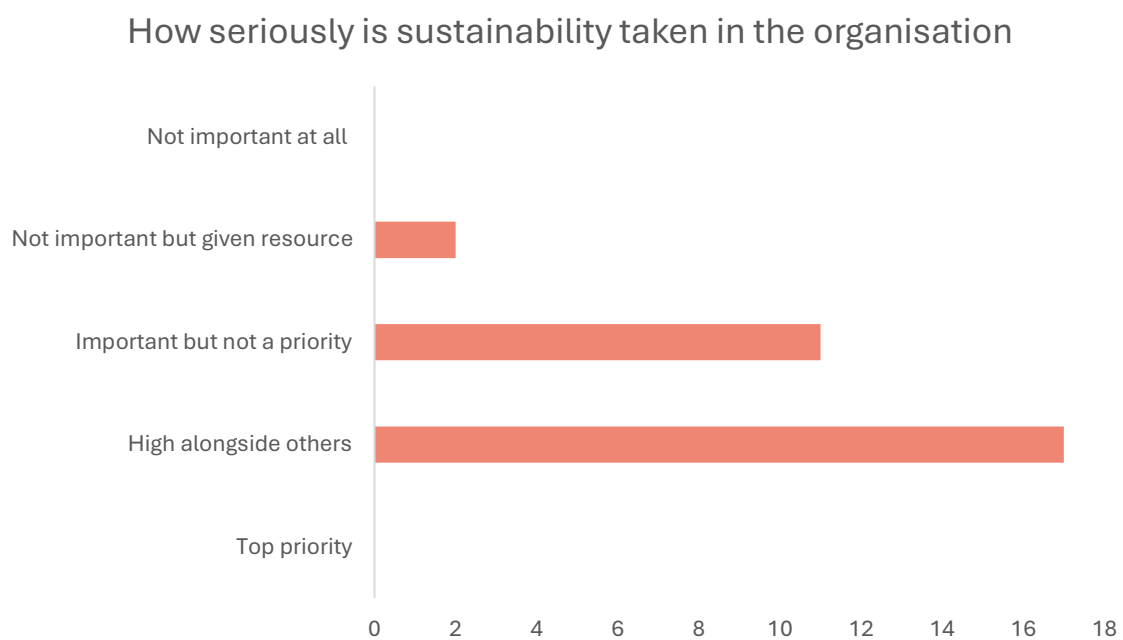
Respondents were also asked how the work was coordinated in the absence of a team whose responsibility it might otherwise have been. Multiple responses mentioned informal networks, through key processes and projects such as the government’s Warm

Homes funding programmes and through into individual objectives for delivery of specific goals. Several respondents highlighted internal reporting to programme boards or Executive teams. Some identical responses were received to where teams existed including “with great difficulty” and one respondent simply stating, “it’s not”.

### Prioritisation

All respondents were asked how seriously sustainability was taken within the organisation and whether, and how, that had changed in recent years.

**Figure 6**



43% said that had changed in recent years, mostly as a result of impending regulations which had forced the issue up the agenda and diverted resources to fixing it. Two respondents did mention that the focus had decreased in recent years and that the work internally had slowed down, even if publicly the organisation maintained its commitments.

20 respondents said they used consultants, with 8 saying they did not and the rest choosing not to answer. Consultants mostly supported with compliance, followed by retrofit, data and energy management. Organisational spend on consultants varied from £10,000 - £250,000.

### Size is not the determining factor

While the size of organisations undeniably affects absolute numbers in terms of people and budgets available for sustainability, as well as what is needed, size was otherwise not statistically significant in most of the findings.

- Smaller organisations and larger organisations all had sustainability strategies and were signed up to the SRS, though this was less uniform in smaller organisations.
- The use of SLLs was the starkest finding here – all the very large organisations and all but one of the large associations had a SLL in place. The numbers reduced for smaller organisations with only one of the smaller organisations signed up.
- Central functions were spread evenly across housing associations with all the large organisations having one, but three of the very large ones going without.
- Smaller organisations tended to have more of a focus on retrofit while larger organisations tended to have more holistic sustainability programmes.
- The use of consultants and requirements to rely on external expertise was evenly spread across all organisations.
- Results on budgets and prioritisation varied significantly within organisations of the same size.

### Job description analysis

Five housing associations shared job descriptions, which strengthened and supported their survey responses, and the general trends in the sector.

We have outlined a few points of interest here, which we felt was not represented adequately within the survey results and merited further investigation.

1. A number of the job descriptions had building and maintaining strong external partnerships & collaboration as key responsibilities. While many of the survey results focused on the need to build internal support networks and bring together delivery coalitions, this was an area where the survey did not focus. In some descriptions, relevant partners were named including local authorities and government departments among them.
2. Similarly, a number had “horizon scanning” for changes and developments as a key requirement. In a fast-changing climate with regulatory and technological developments, this is a must-have. It did not however feature heavily in survey responses.
3. Data was another key need and in fact there were three roles where that was the sole focus.
4. Carbon literacy, familiarity and calculations differed significantly within the sector. Some organisations did not reference carbon at all. Others had in-house analysts who were working on claiming carbon credits in addition to simply calculating and reporting emissions.
5. Where housing associations had the headroom to think beyond retrofit and regulatory decarbonisation, job descriptions reflected interesting and necessary programmes of work thinking about those homes and spaces beyond the 2030 deadline. This included engaging residents in co-design and maintenance for example. Another

organisation had nature specific roles which seems to be new and innovative in the sector.

6. The language is changing even in internal documents. Some strategies have started referring to affordable warmth instead of decarbonisation.

### Focus groups

We ran four focus group sessions which a total of 14 participants took part in. All participants were offered in-person sessions, but all opted into online workshops. Participants were shown headline survey results and were asked a series of structured questions to build on the initial findings in aid of meeting our stated aims.

The housing associations represented in these sessions were mostly very large in units, although three smaller associations were also represented.

### Organising resources

When asked whether housing associations should have a centralised sustainability function, all participants unanimously answered yes, across all sessions. This was irrespective of whether they themselves had indicated currently having a central team. However, there was an even split when asked whether their answer changed based on the size of the organisation.

While all participants recognised the resource disparity between organisations of different sizes, the views on the impact of that differed. Some, particularly those currently working in smaller organisations, felt that there was a limit to specialisms in smaller organisations. Others, including those who also worked in smaller organisations, felt conversely that it would be easier to centralise a sustainability function in a smaller organisation and that responsibilities would need to be split up in bigger organisations.


Multiple participants articulated the benefits of a centralised function regardless of the organisation. This included the necessity of it being a named individual or team's responsibility to set strategy and monitor it, the avoidance of narrow focus in team objectives that perhaps being sat in other functions might engender, and the prospect of making that centralised function a scalable one to align with organisational resources and growth.


Participants were also asked if an organisation having a sustainability strategy, being signed up to the SRS or having a SLLs in place should have a bearing on the size of those teams. All three were deemed to be influential, though some participants commented that finance teams were usually quite self-sufficient in managing SLLs, thereby not impacting sustainability resourcing.


This notably does not align with findings from [earlier research on SLLs in the sector](#), where we found that SLL targets were being set in isolation of organisational strategy. The perception may be that SLL processes are self-sufficient, but the reality is that such self-

sufficiency can create problems of their own. Improvement would look to wider integration.

What bearing should following have on the size of the teams (rated out of five):

<b>SRS</b> <b>4.5 / 5</b> <b>Highest rated</b>	<b>SRS Average influence score: 4.5/5</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• SRS was rated 4.5/5 on average when respondents ranked each factor's influence on sustainability team size.</li><li>• This likely reflects the high prevalence of reporting within sustainability team remits.</li></ul>
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<b>Strategy</b> <b>4.1 / 5</b> <b>High influence</b>	<b>Strategy Average influence score: 4.1/5</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strategy was rated 4.1/5 on average.</li><li>• Several participants noted that the ambition of an association's strategy mattered more than whether a strategy existed.</li></ul>
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<b>SLLs</b> <b>3.9 / 5</b> <b>Moderate-high</b>	<b>SLLs Average influence score: 3.9/5</b>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• SLLs were rated 3.9/5 on average.</li><li>• This was largely linked to the view that finance teams were already self-sufficient in this area.</li></ul>
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### Core responsibilities

The focus groups were asked what a core function should be doing as a minimum. While there was some focus on regulatory compliance, minimum energy efficiency standards and delivery including on retrofit, water management and heat networks, this was a

limited view in the groups. The majority of participants instead highlighted a desire to be strategic and proactive, supported by a suite of capabilities which would enable internal leadership on this front.

Many of the respondents expressed a desire to be seen as an “enabler of other teams”, a “trusted advisor” or “centre of expertise”. While some felt they were already playing this role, most did not feel as though they had enough time or levers to achieve their full potential in this space currently. As sustainability becomes increasingly cross-cutting,

the focus on leading and coordinating the work in this manner does make sense.

Some participants also mentioned the core capabilities which a team would need to hold to deliver this successfully, including project management, engagement and education campaigns to create cohesion and understanding.

Underpinning this was a focus on risk and future resilience, with multiple participants mentioning not only the changing climate and the ongoing impact on residents’ homes and communities, but also the changes in geopolitics and local politics. Research and innovation were mentioned as a capability need here, with an ongoing commitment to horizon scanning and staying up to date on the latest regulatory, technological and risk related changes.

Unsurprisingly given current responsibilities and what most survey respondents indicated as the core role of sustainability, strategy and reporting sat as the baseline behind all activity. Strategy was expressed as “articulating vision, customer focus and financial impacts” by one participant. Some participants further highlighted the data capabilities teams need to be able to adequately deal with reporting requirements.

While the focus groups concentrated on what an “ideal” sustainability function might look like, an attending Executive member did reiterate their call to be “pragmatic”, focusing on minimum energy efficiency standards (“MEES”). Other participants responded with the requirement to look beyond MEES to the post 2029 landscape. Some participants mentioned the role that collaboration might be able to play in delivering more in this space together.



To note, no participants raised the skills other teams working with central sustainability functions will need, and we have not addressed those requirements within the research as a result. Executive members and others considering sustainability resourcing within their organisations will have to also consider wider upskilling including retrofit, contract management and maintenance of green technology in the future.

### Situating sustainability

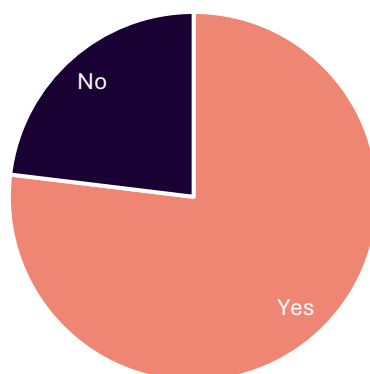
When asked whether sustainability should have an Executive sponsor within associations, the answer was an unanimous yes. When asked why this was necessary, the answers tended to focus on the impetus and profile that an Executive member could bring to the agenda, “echoing the need for everything [a sustainability team] is doing”. Participants also mentioned the job of the lead Executive member to hold the organisation to account for delivery, with one participant mentioning that theirs often “riled up” the other members of Executive to get things done.

It was clear that for this to happen, the Executive member with the responsibility should understand and accept the sustainability goals as their own responsibility, and be willing to take on the challenge of corralling their fellow members towards achieving them. A few mentioned that it also depended on their own sphere of influence internally.

Attending Executive members shared their advice on how to ensure sustainability teams’ wish lists in this space are achieved, including getting things on Executive teams’ radar that are tangible, and managing up appropriately. One Executive member who happened to have responsibility for sustainability themselves said “this is about having more than one sponsor and how to bring entire Executive on board – the work needs to generate autonomy.”

**Figure 8**

Does it matter where sustainability sits?



## “This is about having more than one sponsor – it is about bring the entire Executive on board.”

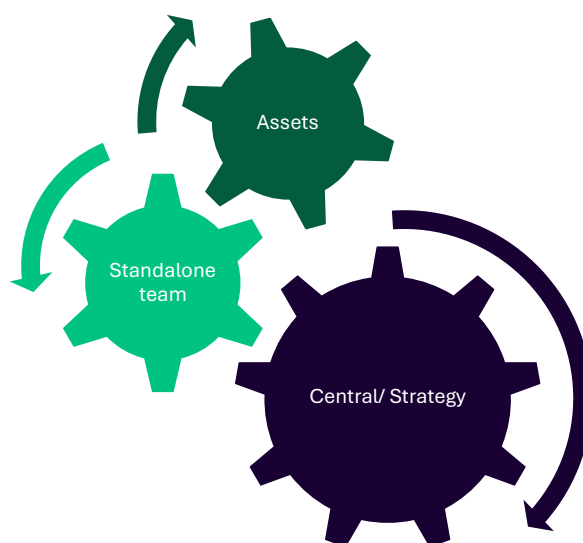
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When asked if it mattered where the sustainability team sat internally in organisational structures, the majority of responses said yes. Reasons given included that it made a difference to the work the team did in turn and also affected internal perceptions of that work, regardless of what it was.

Those who had answered that it did not matter, expressed that they thought it was the leader and commitment to sustainability which mattered and not necessarily a set place within an organisation.

### Where should a sustainability team sit?

The top answer for where a sustainability team should sit was overwhelmingly in favour of some form of central team, with participants highlighting corporate, strategy or the Chief Executive’s office as potential options. These participants highlighted the need for integration with the wider business, with multiple people mentioning the risks of being siloed within another function as a reason to not place sustainability within any other existing function. Although assets was the next popular answer, it had significantly less support. There was a perception that asset management was a “firefighting” function and sustainability needed to be forward looking. Respondents also mentioned the benefit of a standalone team, who could pull specialists from across the business to deliver.



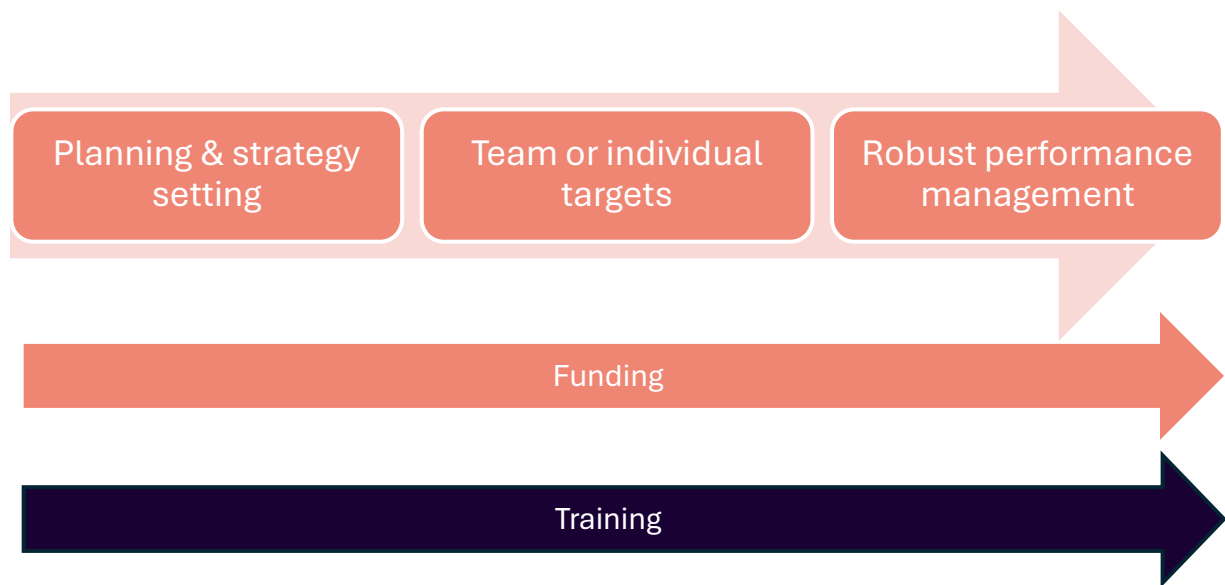
Some participants did recognise the benefits of being more closely linked to delivery functions such as assets management. In order to mitigate the risks of separating delivery from strategy, the importance of designing steering groups well was mentioned.

### Moving from planning to implementation – supporting better integration

All participants were clear that the success of sustainability efforts within housing associations also depended on the actions of teams and individuals outside central functions. Taking those teams on the journey was therefore a key requirement.

We asked questions around how integration with other teams worked. As seen in the survey results, this remained a sensitive topic where efforts had been made, but improvement was needed. One participant remarked the process was “soul destroying”.

Answers in focus groups centred around the following themes, which we have displayed in a pathway format:



Successful approaches will need to span the whole pathway with collaborative approaches to setting strategies and targets within them, embedded targets in individual objectives and a matrix performance management process which places transparency and accountability at its core. Although one organisation mentioned sustainability objectives were linked to bonus remuneration, this was found to have mixed success, as it sometimes created perverse incentives.

To enable delivery, this must be underpinned by adequate funding (or plans to secure funding) and training where those needs are identified.

Many organisations have sustainability champions at different levels and one described their sustainability colleague award initiative, again creating different rewards for engagement. Some participants highlighted the importance of the finance teams in particular and the idea of a finance sustainability champion was well received by those in the sessions.

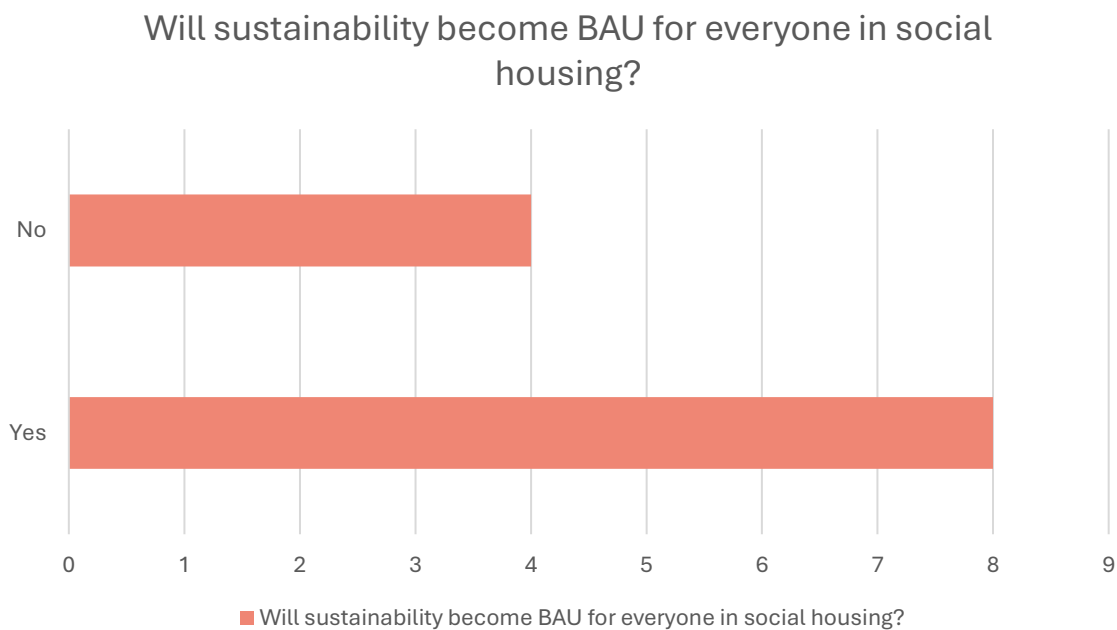
When asked, what could be improved within sustainability integration pathways, participants mentioned:

- Ensuring strategy objectives were in individual annual objectives.
- Enabling greater understanding or visibility of both sustainability and performance internally – this could be done through reports.
- Accountability if targets were not met.
- Regular communications around successes.

One participant simply said it had to be approached “with patience”.

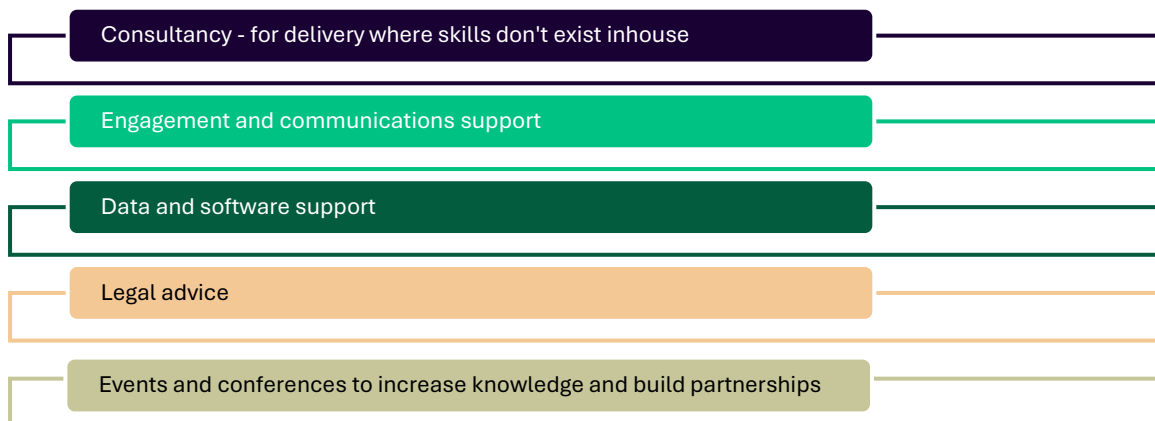
Where there was high reliance on working groups, a contributor commented that it was essential that those attending working groups had sufficient authority to agree to actions on behalf of their teams, and ensure that they were done.

**Figure 9**



When asked if sustainability would eventually become business as usual for everyone working within social housing, the majority of participants answered yes. It was largely felt by all however that this would not negate the need for specialist teams with a focus on technical expertise, climate risks, horizon scanning and providing challenge to the rest of the organisation.

Participants were also asked what budget sustainability functions should be responsible for. Responses were in line with the strategic vision for the functions:



There was a separate but related point that some teams outside of the central function might be holding big budgets in relation to sustainability activity, in particular in assets management and development. Shared control and decision making around those budgets remains elusive in the sector, but building this in will improve outcomes in years to come.

### A growth sector

Participants generally felt that the sector's sustainability journey was just starting, and not winding down as some may have expected in a changing geopolitical context. This might be expected from an audience who were largely made up of sustainability professionals, but the changing climate and immediate regulatory pressures were both cited as reasons why.

Participants were shown the survey results on prioritisation and asked if it was in line with their own experiences. Most people said yes, though there were a small number who were equally surprised it was so high in prioritisation rankings, and others surprised it was not high enough.

## Recommendations

While net zero and sustainability may be subject to negativity from some commentators, the findings from this research shows that sustainability is still trending upwards in housing associations. This is primarily due to regulatory requirements such as minimum energy efficiency standards. Emerging climate risks are also playing a role for those who have started to look beyond the 2029 landscape. Overall sector trends also reflect housing associations who may only have started embarking on their sustainability journeys recently.

To respond to these current and emerging needs, **all housing associations should have a centralised sustainability function**. This will look different depending on the size of the organisation and their strategy, but at a minimum this function should include at least one named individual with clear responsibility for sustainability.

**This individual(s) should be responsible for the following activities and areas as a minimum in the short term:**

- Sustainability-related expertise, including teaching others internally
- Planning and horizon scanning
- Coordination and partnerships.

This minimum is critical for successful delivery of short-term objectives and preparing the organisation for the future requirements to come.

Depending on the size of the organisation and additional requirements of the function, the number working in sustainability could grow. It also depends on the organisation whether this function is concentrated in a single team including energy management, or separated out.

**In the medium to longer-term, sustainability functions should be able to deal with:**

- Reporting
- Strategy
- Risk and resilience
- Act as a trusted advisor and enabler of others in the organisation.

**Key capabilities to support this within sustainability functions are:**

- Leadership
- Data
- Project management
- Communications
- Research and innovation.

For bigger organisations who are advanced on their sustainability journeys, this is the point we would expect them to be at now.

Organisations should consider the skillsets of wider teams as their sustainability journeys progress including on retrofit, contract management and maintenance of green technology.

**A sustainability function should sit centrally**, notwithstanding specific responsibilities for specific teams. Depending on the organisation, this could be with strategy, corporate or the Chief Executive's office.

If the individual tasked with the lead on sustainability is not an Executive member themselves, **there must be Executive level sponsorship**. Those feeding into the work felt it was imperative that this should be someone who could hold others accountable through the nature of their role. This Executive member must also be willing and able to take on the role of influencing and challenging their peer group.

**Sustainability requires concerted actions across the organisation and therefore needs buy-in from the entire organisation.**

This being supported by the ecosystem doing the work means the following within organisations:

- 1) Collaborative and open planning and strategy setting
- 2) Targets – embedded in individual and team objectives
- 3) Management of those targets and reporting
- 4) Funding to support delivery where needed
- 5) Training to support delivery where needs are identified
- 6) Champions and communications.

There was a clear desire that **there must be consequences where targets are not met**.

We are moving into a world where sustainability becomes more 'Business as Usual' in housing associations but we are not there yet. In any event, the need for centralised function with the technical expertise, horizon scanning function and job of challenging remains.


**Sustainability functions must be given the budget to in order to succeed on the organisation's sustainability strategy.** This includes paying for expertise where the organisation cannot resource the requirements itself. Examples include: technical consultancy, engagement and communications support, data and software support, legal advice and external events and conferences.

In organisations looking to take the next step, **shared decision making over bigger budgets** such as the asset management team's retrofit budgets, would be the next logical step to enable true collaboration and accountability.

For organisations of all sizes, there is **unlocked potential in partnering with others in the sector**. The outcomes are particularly pertinent for smaller organisations who may not have the economies of scale or resources to unlock research and innovation on their own. This could include shared resources between housing associations and joint procurement opportunities including pooled consultancy budgets. At a minimum, bigger associations with large teams should be openly sharing information and learnings where applicable.




## A framework for the future

For those considering how to resource sustainability, we have created a framework based on the findings of the research and organisational size. This should be taken a guide to inform board conversations about ambition in this space – there may be legitimate reasons why smaller associations want to, and are doing, more, as well as larger organisations doing less. An equitable division of labour within the sector however depends on shared resources, carried largely on the shoulders of those who are most likely to be able to afford it.



### Small

<10,000 homes

 <h4>Sustainability resourcing</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Named lead</li><li>• Delivery teams, e.g. in assets</li></ul>	 <h4>Minimum operating model</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Coordination of regulatory activity</li><li>• Pooled resources with others to identify and build for future needs</li></ul>	 <h4>Strategy covers</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Regulatory requirements</li><li>• Partnerships for delivery</li></ul>
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### Medium

10–30,000 homes

 <h4>Sustainability resourcing</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Named operational lead and Executive support</li><li>• Delivery teams, e.g. in assets</li></ul>	 <h4>Minimum operating model</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sustainability-related expertise, including internal upskilling</li><li>• Planning and horizon scanning</li><li>• Coordination and</li></ul>	 <h4>Strategy covers</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Regulatory requirements</li><li>• Horizon scanning</li><li>• Resilience building</li><li>• Partnership working</li></ul>
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## Big

30–50,000 homes



### Sustainability resourcing

- Central team or teams with Executive lead (at least 3 people)
- Matrix working with leads in key delivery teams, e.g. assets, development, procurement



### Minimum operating model

- Sustainability-related expertise, including internal upskilling
- Planning and horizon scanning
- Coordination and partnerships
- Reporting
- Organisational structure to support work of central team



### Strategy covers

- Holistic view of issues, not just minimum requirements
- Potential use of sustainability-linked financing
- Focus on sharing information and support with the sector, especially smaller organisations



## Very big

>50,000 homes



### Sustainability resourcing

- Central teams of approximately 5 people with Executive lead
- Matrix working with leads in key delivery teams, e.g. assets, development, procurement
- Investment in technical expertise and innovation



### Minimum operating model

- Sustainability-related expertise, including internal upskilling
- Planning and horizon scanning
- Coordination and partnerships
- Reporting
- Organisational structure to support work of central team, with rewards and consequences around targets



### Strategy covers

- Sustainable finance use
- Lead on sharing information and supporting smaller associations
- Lead on external partnerships
- Builds requisite capabilities internally and in the broader sector