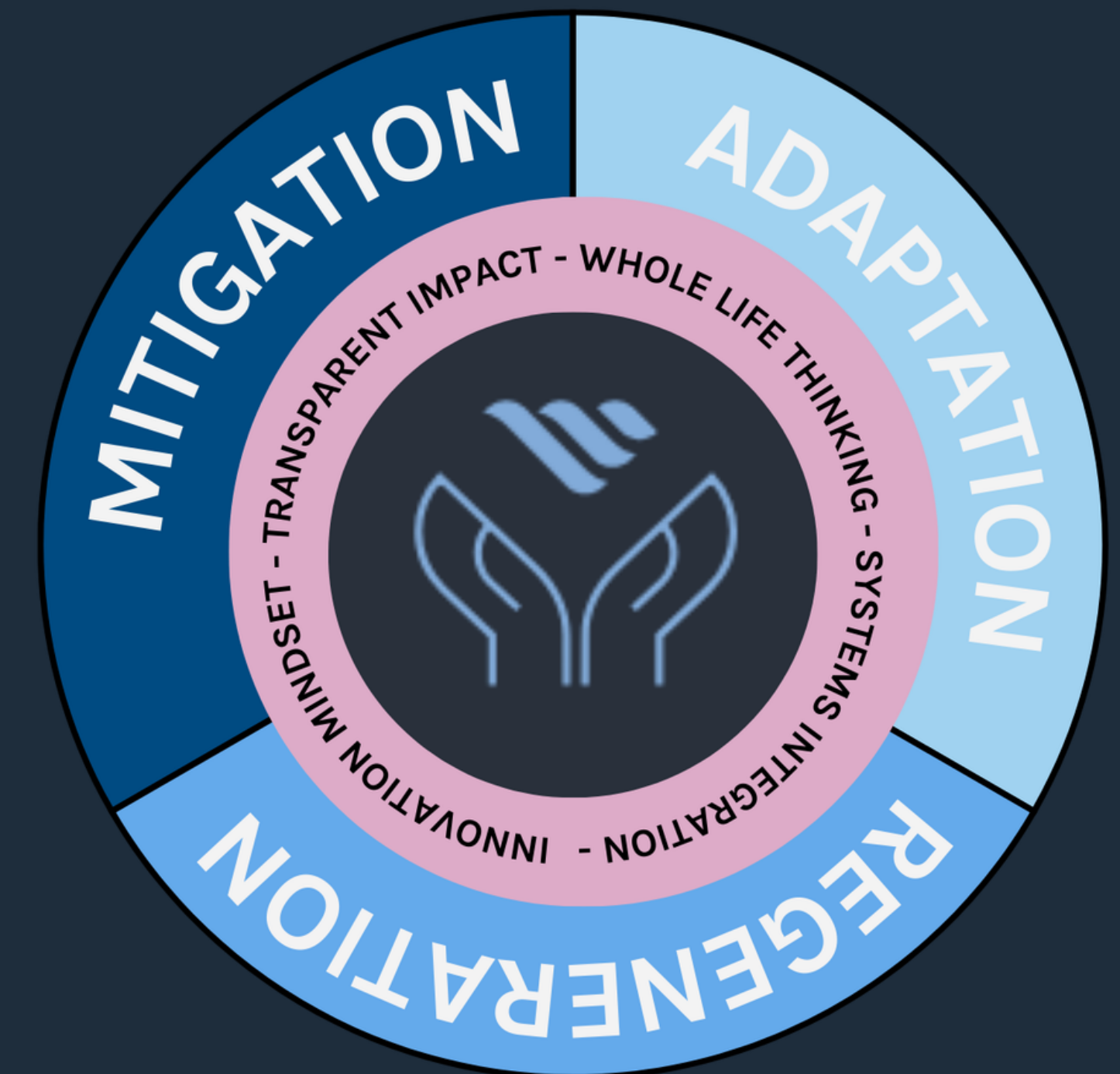


Deconstructing Sustainability -

Why good people disagree and how better conversations lead to better decisions.

July 2026 - Disagreement Community of Practice



Built differently.



Paloma Hermoso

Head of Sustainability - Ward Williams



Who am I?

- From a degree in Psychology to a Construction Professional
- FAPM, FCIOB, FRSA
- Accreditations in Sustainable Construction

Ward Williams

- Built Environment Consultancy
- 8 Offices
- Queens Award for Enterprise
- B Corp



When you hear the word sustainability... What comes to mind?

In Construction it could be...



Which one is the top sustainability priority?



In construction, sustainability has become one of the most polarising words we use.

Why?



Sustainability isn't one problem.

It's dozens of competing priorities.



We don't disagree because people care more or less.

We disagree because people optimise for different outcomes.

Person	Optimise for...
Client	Return on investment
QS	Cost certainty
Architect	Design quality
Contractor	Programme
Planner	Policy
Asset Manager	Operating costs
Community	Quality of life
Sustainability Consultant	Long-term impact



Are any of these people wrong?



We realised we were having the wrong conversation.

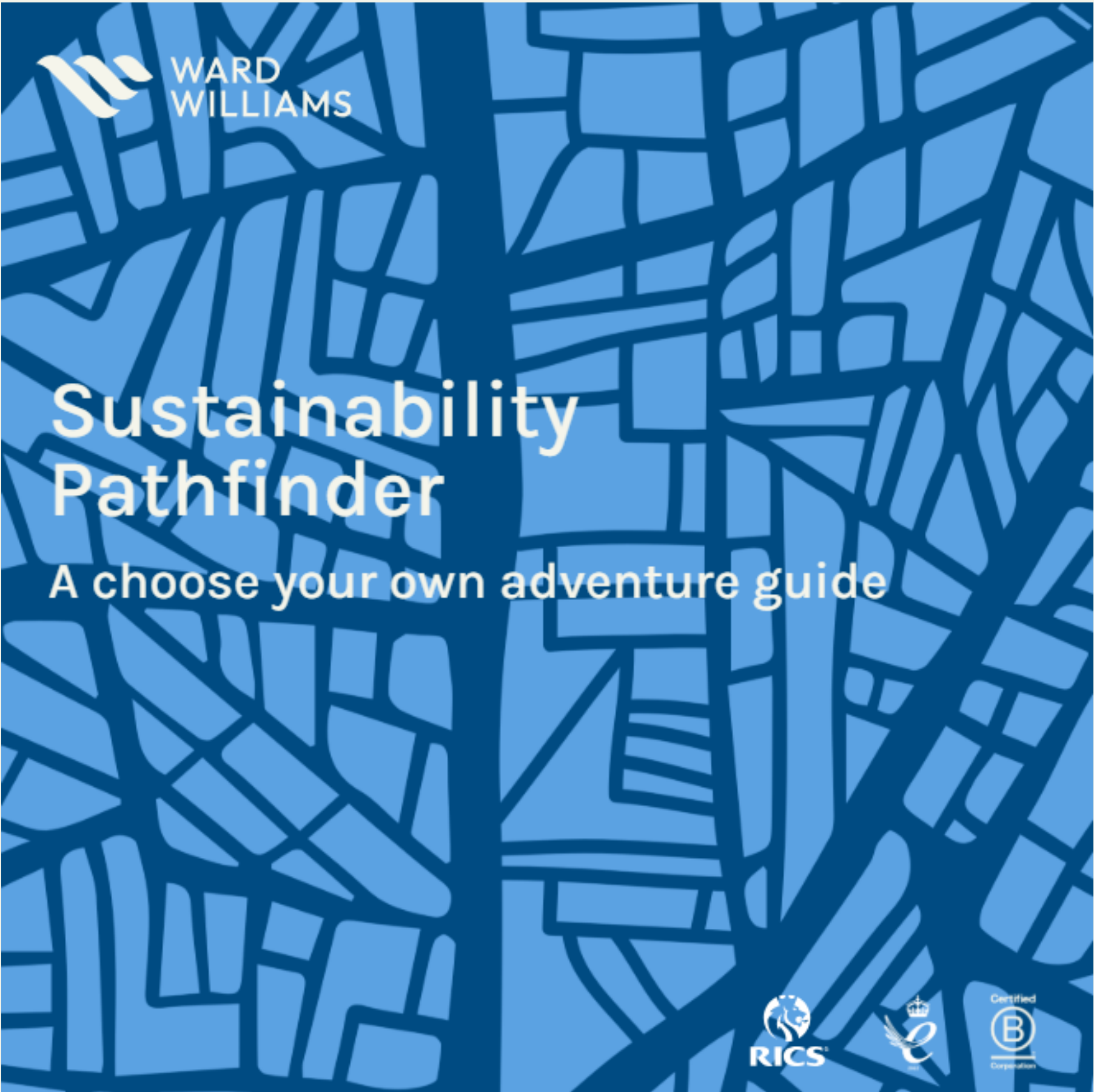
How do we make
this project
sustainable?



What matters most on
this project?



The Sustainability Pathfinder



Where are you now? Maturity self check

Before you can plan the road ahead, it helps to know where you're starting from.

Every organisation sits somewhere on the sustainability journey, from first steps to industry leadership. This quick self-check isn't a test and there are no wrong answers; it's just to help you see your starting point and pick the most useful next moves.

What to do
Go with your first instinct. Pick up a pen, colour of your choice. Read each statement and circle (we want you to scribble on this document, remember?) the answer that feels closest to your current situation. When you're done, tally up whether you chose mostly A's, B's or C's.

Don't overthink it, this is between you and yourself. It's designed to give you clarity, not pressure.

Questions

1. Our sustainability goals are...
A. Still defining what they should include.
B. Set at a corporate level, but not always reflected in individual projects.
C. Clear, measurable and actively shaping how we make decisions day-to-day.

2. When it comes to carbon reduction, we...
A. Haven't started tracking it yet.
B. Measure operational energy, but need to go deeper on embodied carbon and whole-life impacts.
C. Regularly report across all scopes, set reduction targets and use carbon data to inform investment choices.

3. On biodiversity and nature, our approach is...
A. Largely reactive, we meet requirements when needed.
B. Growing, we're starting to integrate a nature-based approach..
C. Integrated, we see nature as an asset and build it into every stage of planning and delivery.

4. When discussing social value, we...
A. Don't really use that language yet.
B. Deliver community benefits but would like to measure them better.
C. Track and report social value outcomes alongside cost and carbon metrics.

5. Our supply chain and procurement process...
A. Focuses mainly on price and delivery.
B. Includes some sustainability criteria, but not consistently.
C. Embeds sustainability requirements, performance metrics and partnership expectations.

6. Within our team, sustainability is...
A. A topic for specialists.
B. Something we're trying to build into everyone's role.
C. A shared mindset that shapes how we plan, design, deliver and manage projects.

7. When it comes to funding and investment...
A. Sustainability feels like an extra cost.
B. We're learning how to link sustainability outcomes to financial performance.
C. We actively use sustainability performance to access funding, attract investors and improve value.

Ours is green

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The Sustainability Pathfinder

Getting Started

If you're at the beginning of your sustainability journey, start simple. The goal isn't perfection, it's progress.

Your first step is to understand **where you are now**. List below what you own, manage or deliver (buildings, land, projects, supply chains). Think about where energy is used, where carbon is created and where people are most affected.

Next, map out your biggest risks and opportunities.

What's costing you money, wasting resources or creating reputational risk? Where could a small change make a big difference?

Then, set a clear, realistic direction.

Write down three things your organisation wants to achieve in the next two years – for example, reducing energy bills, meeting EPC standards or improving community impact. You can use the mindmap on the next page.

Finally, take one visible step.

Fix what's easy to fix. Upgrade lighting. Check building performance. Run a small pilot. The point is to build momentum, not to have all the answers. Each small move helps you learn, builds confidence and gets people on board. From there, the bigger actions start to feel possible.

Choose your next step

Need a simple business case to win support?

Go to Business Case Builder on page 20

Not sure what to focus on first?

Go to Mapping What Matters on page 22

Confused about which regulations or funding streams affect you?

Go to Regulation & Funding Radar on page 24

Worried about doing the wrong thing or wasting money?

Go to Common Strategy Pitfalls on page 26

Financing Sustainability

Sustainable outcomes don't happen by accident... and they don't happen for free.

Better-performing, climate-ready, low-impact assets require investment. But that investment isn't a burden, it's an opportunity. The way you think about cost can decide whether sustainability feels like a drain or becomes one of your greatest long-term advantages.

For many organisations, money is seen as the main blocker to meeting sustainability goals. But the real barrier isn't cash... it's perspective.

Every pound you spend shapes the resilience, reputation and value of what you build. And right now, the smartest money is moving toward sustainability, not away from it.



Money Myths – Busted

Myth	Truth
Sustainability always costs more.	In reality, most sustainable actions reduce lifecycle costs. Initial capital costs may rise slightly, but payback periods are shortening fast.
We'll do it later, when we have more funding.	Delaying action usually increases cost. Energy and carbon regulations are tightening, meaning every year of inaction adds risk, costs and lost opportunities for grants or low-interest finance.
Funding options are too complicated.	There's actually more support out there than most people realise. The challenge is knowing where to look and matching the right funding to the right project.
Finance teams don't care about sustainability.	They do, when it's framed in their language. Show how sustainability improves operational efficiency, reduces exposure to future regulation or strengthens credit ratings. That's the bridge between purpose and performance.



The Sustainability Pathfinder

Project Journey Maps

Every project, no matter the type, follows the same broad journey.

At each stage, you have the power to make better choices, to set ambitions, test ideas and track what success really looks like. Think of this as your sustainability compass through the project lifecycle.

Start where you are, not where the textbook says you should be.

1. DEFINE: Set the Direction

This is where the DNA of the project is formed. The earlier sustainability is built in, the cheaper, easier and more effective it becomes.

Key Actions

- Agree clear sustainability goals across carbon, nature, resilience and social value.
- Build them into the Project Initiation Document, funding case and risk plan.
- Define measurable KPIs so you can track real progress.
- Make sure they are SMART.
- Align governance and decision-making so sustainability has a voice from day one.
- Frame the business case around both risk reduction and long-term value.

Key Outputs

A shared vision that connects ambition, delivery and funding, with sustainability fully integrated into the case for investment.

Need to build your business case?

Go to Business Case Builder on page 20

2. DESIGN: Turn Ambition into Action

The design phase is where ideas meet numbers. Every material, layout and system choice locks in performance for decades.

Key Actions

- Use Lifecycle Carbon Assessment (LCA) to compare materials and methods.
- Embed circular economy principles: reuse, flexibility, future adaptability.
- Design for energy efficiency, resilience and wellbeing from the start.
- Challenge standards to avoid over-engineering and unnecessary carbon or cost.
- Update project controls so sustainability metrics sit alongside cost, time and risk.

Key Outputs

A practical Sustainability Plan showing how goals will be achieved and tracked: clear, measurable and aligned with cost and design decisions.

Not sure what to measure?

This way to Mapping What Matters on page 22



Hard Conversations And How To Handle Them

Sustainability rarely fails because of a lack of ambition.

It fails in the meeting room when a plan meets a budget, when a funder raises an eyebrow, when someone says "we can't afford it" or "it's too complicated".

These moments can decide whether sustainability stays on the page or makes it into the project. Here's how to face them calmly, confidently and with evidence on your side.

Turning ambition into action

You've got an organisational net zero target and a sustainability strategy. But when it comes to a real project, everyone asks: "What does that actually mean here?"

This is where ambition meets reality. The challenge isn't writing more targets, it's picking the right ones. Start small and measurable: energy use, embodied carbon, biodiversity or social value. Choose two or three metrics you can actually influence and track. It's better to measure a few things well than many things poorly.

When the design team needs direction

Early design meetings are where sustainability can quietly die. You hear the classics: "That's not in scope." "We'll look at that later." "There's no budget for it". And sometimes, the conversation slips into a fog of acronyms and technical terms that few people in the room fully understand, but no one wants to admit it.

It's easy for design discussions to become exclusive. Engineers talk in kilowatts, architects in daylight factors, sustainability consultants in lifecycle modules and the client team nods along, half-understanding, half-hoping it's all fine. That's the danger zone.

This is your cue to slow the conversation down.

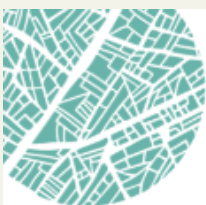
Sustainability only works when everyone in the room understands what's being proposed, what it costs and what it achieves. Don't be afraid to ask "silly" questions; they're usually the ones that bring clarity.

Ask the design team to show options side by side. Get them to translate jargon into plain English: what does that system actually do? Why is it better? What's the payback? If it can't be explained simply, it's probably not ready to specify.

Keep sustainability visible in the brief, the budget, the scope and the decision log. The earlier it's embedded, the cheaper and more effective it is.



The Sustainability Pathfinder



No-nonsense Sustainability Glossary

Sustainablah

[Noun]
The endless stream of feel-good sustainability talk that goes nowhere. All promise, no plan.

We are not here for that. Sustainability works best when is clear and practical, so we've stripped out the buzzwords. This quick glossary will help you cut through the noise and focus on what matters.

Adaptation

Adjusting to the effects of climate change, like improving drainage for heavy rain or using materials that can handle higher temperatures.

Biodiversity

All the living things: plants, animals, insects, soil life – that make our world work.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

A UK rule that says new developments must leave nature better than before.

Carbon Neutral

When a company balances the emissions it produces with an equivalent amount of carbon “removed” or “offset” elsewhere. This term is now widely discouraged because it often relies on buying offsets instead of reducing emissions.

Carbon Offsetting

When you invest on projects to “balance out” the carbon you have produced elsewhere. It's better than doing nothing, but it's not a free pass. The real goal is to cut emissions first, then offset what's left.

Circular Economy

Designing things so nothing goes to waste. Reuse, repurpose, recycle and design for easy repair, not replacement.

Climate Ready

Being prepared for hotter summers, wetter winters and more extreme weather. It's about designing buildings, services and systems that can cope with what's coming.

Climate Risk

The ways a changing climate can affect your organisation from flood risk and heat stress to supply chain disruption and insurance costs.

Embodied Carbon

The carbon released to make and transport materials before a building even opens its doors.

Greenhushing

Staying silent about real sustainability action for fear of criticism.

Greenwashing

Making things sound greener than they are.

Just Transition

Making sure the move to a greener economy is fair protecting jobs, affordability and opportunities for everyone.

Mitigation

Cutting the emissions that cause climate change through efficiency, renewable energy or smarter design.



Build your own Paper Pathfinder

Cut it out, fold it up and you're ready to go. Ask someone to pick a number, open and close it that many times, then lift a flap to reveal a micro-prompt. It's a fun way to spark fresh thinking, start conversations and get people talking about sustainability without the pressure or the jargon.



How to make your pathfinder



Let's play a game of would you rather...



Let's see what happens when we try it.

SCENARIO 1 - HOSPITAL

A council has secured £10 million to improve the biggest hospital in the region.

Option A

Spend the money making a hospital Net Zero.

- Reduce emissions dramatically.
- Lower energy bills for decades.
- Improve resilience against future energy prices.

The hospital remains exactly as it is inside.

Patients still wait in outdated wards.

Option B

Spend the money modernising patient facilities.

- Better wards.
- Better mental wellbeing.
- Better patient experience.
- Better staff retention.

Carbon emissions remain largely unchanged.

If you were the Chief Executive, which option would you approve,
and how would you justify that decision to the public?



SCENARIO 2 - HOUSING

A local authority has planning permission for a new housing development. The original proposal was for 600 affordable homes. Following following a successful legal challenge on environmental grounds, the plans have been redesigned to protect an important area of woodland and increase biodiversity. The revised proposal will now deliver 280 homes instead. The waiting list for social housing in the area is over 4,000 families.

Option A

Build 600 affordable homes, accepting the loss of part of the woodland.

Option B

Protect an ancient woodland and build 280 homes instead.

You have five minutes before the planning committee votes.
Which option are you recommending, and why?



SCENARIO 3 - SCHOOL

A large primary school in a deprived community has secured £5 million in government funding. The school serves over 600 pupils, many of whom come from low-income households. Demand for additional support has increased significantly in recent years, and the school is also struggling with rising energy costs. The funding can only be spent once. The Governors must decide between two proposals.

Option A

Use the funding to transform the school into one of the most energy-efficient schools in the region.

The project would:

- Reduce carbon emissions by more than 70%.
- Cut energy bills substantially for decades.
- Improve classroom temperatures and air quality.
- Protect the school against future energy price rises.

However, there would be no funding left to increase staffing or pupil support.

Option B

Use the funding to:

- Recruit 18 additional teachers and teaching assistants.
- Expand pastoral care and mental health support.
- Provide targeted literacy and numeracy interventions.
- Provide free breakfast for every pupil who needs one.

The school buildings would remain inefficient, with high energy costs and significantly higher carbon emissions.

Which proposal would you recommend, and how would you justify your decision to parents, staff and the local community?



HOSPITAL

What were we really disagreeing about?

Not hospitals.

- Present needs
- Future resilience
- Health outcomes
- Financial stewardship

HOUSING

What were we really disagreeing about?

Not housing.

- Biodiversity
- Social justice
- Intergenerational fairness
- Political accountability

SCHOOL

What were we really disagreeing about?

Not schools.

- Children's futures
- Educational equality
- Climate responsibility
- Long-term public investment



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