

Leading Beyond Authority Sustainability Leadership in an Age of Uncertainty

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'Soil: The Quiet Revolution' at Anthropy26



Foreword

Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO) sessions at Anthropy 2026: synthesis at a time of change.

John O'Brien, Founder and Chairman, Anthropy

During 2025 and early 2026, we were increasingly hearing from those leading Corporate Social Responsibility, Environmental, Social & Governance and sustainability functions within businesses that the nature of their work had changed. The challenge was no longer simply one of making the case for sustainability, nor even of sustaining organisational commitment to it. It had become a more complex question of how to lead through ambiguity, political contestation, financial constraint, regulatory expansion, technological disruption and shifting expectations inside and beyond the organisation. This led to a set of conversations to be planned for Anthropy26.

Anthropy exists to create the conditions in which such conversations and challenges can be explored honestly and constructively. Based within the world's largest indoor rainforest and Mediterranean biomes at the UK's Eden Project, there could therefore be few better settings in which to bring together senior professionals and their equivalents to attempt to articulate the challenge now facing Chief Sustainability Officers, and to consider what the next phase of sustainability leadership may require.

This communiqué is produced as a thought-provoking and action-supporting reflection. Its purpose is not only to serve those who participated in the conversations at Anthropy26, but to offer useful insight to the wider professional community wherever they may be working. It seeks to capture both the strategic realities and the human experience of those operating in this field, and to support boards, executive teams and sustainability leaders as they consider how best to respond.

I am sincerely grateful to our editorial group, who moderated the sessions and then collated, interpreted and shaped their findings into this communiqué. Their expertise, judgement and commitment have been central to producing a document that is both reflective of the conversations and useful to those seeking to act upon them.

Editorial Group

- **Professor David Grayson, CBE**
- **Louise Kjellerup Roper:**
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- **Dr Sally Uren OBE:**
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The case has sharpened; the permission has weakened

The reality has rarely been clearer. Physical risk is hitting operations and balance sheets. Supply chains are visibly fragile. Customer demand for credible sustainability performance is intact and, in the right framings, growing. Regulators, even where the political pendulum has swung against ambition, have produced an architecture of disclosure and risk discipline that did not exist five years ago.

Inside organisations, the picture has inverted. Colleagues read the political weather and conclude that the topic is no longer fashionable or important. Internal advocates who joined the conversation in good faith have, in some firms, gone quiet. Sceptics have become vocal and actively obstructive. Yet the numbers do not reflect this retreat. Recent analysis suggests that only a small minority of large global companies have rolled back their commitments under direct legal pressure; the substantial majority have either held the line or quietly become more ambitious. A Harvard Business Review¹ study of seventy-five firms last September found roughly one in eight had retreated, while around eighty-five per cent were holding steady or accelerating, often out of public view.

“Sustainability is no longer fashionable, but the underlying business case has not changed.”

The strategic question is whether to push back against the silence or to work with it. One potential Trojan Horse for getting sustainability back up the Board and C-Suite agenda is AI: leading a conversation with a topic that everyone in the building wants to discuss, and letting it travel naturally to long-term, systemic and ethical questions, which is the sustainability conversation by another route. The alternative, dropping moralistic framing in favour of harder commercial argument, relieves the political pressure but creates cultural debt among employees who joined for the values rather than the value, which could be deep felt. Strategies that plan only for one half of the story will fail in the other.

Companies aren't rolling back sustainability commitments. They're doing the work quietly. Silence is the real problem.¹

1 in 8
firms have retreated.

85%
are holding or accelerating.

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¹ Harvard Business Review, Are Companies Actually Scaling Back Their Climate Commitments?

The wider operating context: fragmented, contested and national

Anthropy sessions also surfaced a wider context that matters to the CSO role. Sustainability leaders are not operating in a settled system but are working through geopolitical instability, energy insecurity, fragmented regulation, divergent national politics and supply chains exposed by conflict, climate and economic volatility. What once appeared to be a broadly aligned direction of travel has become a more uneven and contested landscape.

For multinational organisations in particular, this fragmentation creates a particular form of leadership pressure. A commitment that appears commercially obvious in one market may be politically sensitive in another; a disclosure regime that offers discipline in one jurisdiction may create hesitation elsewhere. CSOs are therefore increasingly required to translate not only between functions inside the business, but between countries, cultures, regulators and political narratives outside it.

Due to Anthropy's UK focus there is naturally a specifically UK dimension to this conversation, albeit in the wider global context. The United Kingdom's attractiveness as a place to do business has long rested not only on legal and regulatory reliability,

but on a wider reputation for responsible business, ethical conduct, governance standards and societal contribution. In that sense, sustainability is not simply a corporate agenda, it is part of the national economic proposition: as one of the ways in which business earns trust, investment earns legitimacy and growth earns permission.

This matters because the conversation is not only about the future of a function. It is about the future of responsible enterprise in a country seeking confidence, resilience and long-term renewal. The CSO sits at the intersection of these forces: commercial, social, political, environmental and national.

What works in one market may be politically sensitive in another.



Geopolitical instability



Energy insecurity



Fragmented regulation



Divergent national politics



Exposed supply chains

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Risk has won the boardroom but that is not yet a victory

Risk has become the most reliably effective language for getting sustainability on the board and C-suite agenda.

Climate is now treated as an existential risk by serious firms, not as rhetorical flourish. Climate impacts like unseasonal rainfall, water arriving in places it should not be, supply chain partners on the ground struggling to keep ahead of conditions they have not seen before, are an issue for corporate value chains today, not some time in the future. Asked whether anyone was seeing systemic risk to the business displace the regulatory nudge as the primary motivator, one CSO answered with a single sentence:

“Our business won’t exist.”

In the finance sector, risk language has earned the function a hearing it had not previously had. One CSO from the financial services sector reported that physical risk conversations with insurers and infrastructure clients now run into the dozens over a year, and physical risk is being treated as a competitive variable in client engagement rather than a compliance exercise. One CSO pressed her strategy team, well in advance, to model a major geopolitical scenario; when the scenario unfolded as predicted, the credibility earned was used to drive longer-horizon scenarios across the rest of the business.

But getting traction by framing sustainability as a risk agenda has a downside:

“Risk gets you attention in the boardroom, but opportunity gets you excitement. Risk gets you ten minutes; opportunity gets you the future.”

A function defining its agenda wholly as risk management wins the board’s attention but loses the energy, imagination and capital that the next decade requires. Most large organisations optimise for a past, focusing on efficiency and on doing what they already do a little bit better. In a period of rupture, that is not going to be a great strategy.

The carbon credit is a useful case. Read as risk, it is the inert retirement number that has long defined the market. Read as opportunity, it becomes something else: one participant described using AI to give buyers a living account of the projects they have funded, such as biodiversity recovery, beekeeping income, agroforestry yields, or biochar applied to smallholder land. A line that drew rueful agreement sharpens the challenge: ‘people who imagine tend not to get promoted in large organisations’. If the sustainability function is to fully do its job, that has to be overcome.

Defining sustainability solely as risk management wins attention. It doesn’t win transformation.



Risk gets ten minutes.



Opportunity gets the future.

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Integration works when done well - capture is the trap

In recent years, the sustainability function has, in many organisations, moved closer to finance. Sustainability is being absorbed into, or aligned with, the CFO's office in firm after firm. The benefits are consistent: better commercial discipline, sharper questioning, finance teams becoming more sustainability-literate over time.

Integration done well looks like this. A CSO whose function now reports directly to the CFO described the change as opening audiences not previously available to her, while demanding a commercial and financial fluency she had not been hired for. The result was visible in the recent revision of her firm's water ambition: operational businesses had been walked through detailed maps of long-horizon water-scarcity exposure for their sites, and had bought into a sharper, more focused ambition for cost-saving and resilience reasons. The work from there was carried by finance and operational leaders, not by the sustainability function. Internally, the role had begun to be known as VP for long-term resilience rather than VP Sustainability.

The risk runs the other way. Where the function is absorbed into other departments without strategic intent, neglect tends to follow rather than integration: finance reverts to finance, procurement reverts to procurement, and the cross-functional ambition that justified the dissolution evaporates with the organogram. Both accounts are true.

“Without someone leading sustainability in the business, a finance function will go back to doing what a finance function does, and a procurement function will effectively do what it does.”

Compliance has become one of the clearest examples of this tension. Reporting requirements have brought discipline, comparability and accountability, but they also consume time, budget and attention. Several conversations returned to the same practical anxiety: the more the function is absorbed by disclosure, the less capacity it has for experimentation, innovation and business transformation.

The task is therefore not to reject compliance, but to prevent it from becoming the ceiling of ambition. The best sustainability functions are learning how to make reporting serve strategy, rather than allowing strategy to be reduced to reporting. That distinction will become increasingly important as regulation matures and internal patience with process-heavy sustainability work becomes thinner.

In firms under intensive supervision, the regulator has become a best friend; recent on-site engagement has produced supervisors who are, in one CSO's words, 'bloody good and competent now', where five years earlier they had known nothing about the topic. In other firms, compliance is the work that most needs to be pushed back to where it belongs in order to reclaim the strategic role.

Integration is the right direction of travel. Capture is the failure mode that lies along it. Boards must distinguish between the two.

Value frameworks won the language but the practice lags behind

The shift from having a sustainability strategy to having a strategy that is sustainable is now the dominant narrative promoted by CSOs. Sustainable value creation has displaced the older business case for sustainability.

Inside that shift sits a quieter discomfort:

“We are now very explicitly value-led, not values-led.”

The CSO who shared the line above did not like it; she did, however, recognise its grip, and convened a cross-company community of sustainability professionals in response, working to broaden the definition of value beyond financial. Several efforts globally are grappling with the same question. Natura & Co's integrated profit and loss², Commonland's Four Returns Framework³ and the Capitals Coalition's Framework for Integrated Decision-Making⁴ each broaden value beyond financial capital in their own way. In order for an organisation to value something, that value must be made visible. The frameworks that will endure are those that hold both: they count what counts without forgetting why it counts.

Value creation embedded well looks like this: a deep long-term ownership culture; an executive-level value-creation model that informs capital allocation, and which is treated with the same routine seriousness as financial materiality.

Having robust frameworks and models matters, but often the real challenge is how to hand over responsibility:

“I have in the past been known for talking about my baby when I think of a project. That was quite a profound lesson to me, letting go.”

² Natura - Management by Impact IP&L

³ Common Lands 4 Returns Framework

⁴ Capitals Coalition Integrated Decision-Making Framework

The strategy is now owned by the executive, not by the function. The value architecture succeeds precisely because the values that built it are no longer concentrated in a single role.

That account is, however, not the entire picture. It is clear that most firms – especially mid-sized ones – are ten to fifteen years behind the value-creation thinking of leading CSOs and sustainability leaders. Not for lack of interest, but because the language of integrated profit and loss does not yet map onto a business whose realistic ambition is to fund a community project or improve operating costs in a single location. Boards and CSOs of large firms should treat their supply chain's transition as part of their own strategy, not as a tail risk.

Converging paths at Anthropy26



The 2030 reckoning is unavoidable - it demands a collective honest miss

Many corporate 2030 targets will not be met, and the strategic risk is no longer the misses themselves - it is what happens when those misses are disclosed.

Two positions hold the field. The first argues that targets remain useful precisely because they cannot all be reached:

“Frankly, we won’t hit all our targets. But I know we wouldn’t have pushed ourselves as hard if we hadn’t set ourselves some BHAGs. Have we failed? I don’t think so. But we need to be honest and transparent.”

The second argues that an uncoordinated cascade of disclosures across 2028 to 2030 will become a media event in its own right — one that damages the broader sustainable-business case more than the misses themselves do. The temptation to quietly reset targets to lower ambition is strong and would do significant damage to the field.

The 2030 conversation needs to be galvanised collectively rather than left to individual companies. Potential convenors include the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and the We Mean Business Coalition. Without that convening, the field walks into a serious set of problems by 2030 — or earlier. A coordinated honest miss is materially different from a quiet individual reset. Only one preserves credibility for what comes after 2030.

Real-economy collaboration works when it is built around specific, hard problems rather than generic pre-competitive themes. The Invest in Women Code, a peer-bank data-sharing agreement on lending to women-led businesses, has produced shared analytics on a market failure that no single bank can address alone. The Sustainable Healthcare Coalition, founded by UK government and the NHS more than a decade ago, has built a free-to-use carbon calculator for clinical trials, populated by member-company data, that is now shaping operational practice across the sector. There are sparks of a different way of thinking about collaboration with external partners, industry or otherwise, but they have not yet caught.

“Be brave. Reach for the stars. You may just end up on the moon.”

The point of an ambitious target is not its perfect achievement. It is the work the ambition unlocks while it is in force.

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If AI is the question, then who should answer?

Almost no CSO wants to take formal responsibility for AI. Almost all accept that the function should have a coordinating, ethical and long-term voice in AI decisions, on the grounds that only the sustainability function routinely thinks across the value chain, on long horizons, and about systemic impacts. Nearly all express concern about the energy and water footprint of AI.

The gap is not in willingness. It is in capability and remit. Few CSOs are engaged with, or driving, the adoption of AI inside their own firms. The risk is not that the function over-claims AI. It is that the function under-engages while AI develops without the disciplines, value-chain thinking, materiality, long-term horizon, stakeholder process, all aspects that sustainability has spent decades building. In the current vacuum, this means the people who want to make the world better are effectively leaning out of AI, whilst the people who simply want to sell more things are leaning in.

One participant described the reflex in her own team:

“AI is evil. I’m not going to use it.”

Her response:

“Everybody’s using it - you will get left behind if you don’t. Think of how you could multiply your impact by learning how to do this well.”

It captures the cost of disengagement at the team level. The cost at the system level is much larger because if sustainability-minded actors cede the AI conversation, or simply don’t engage, the technology will be shaped by those whose primary interest is commercial return.

AI’s most exposed weakness is its dependence on the data structures beneath it. An AI system at a major UK bank had classified a women’s health start-up, selling hormone replacement therapy and related products, as adult entertainment, on the basis of word matches against Standard Industrial Classification codes designed in the 1940s and 1950s. The categorisation could not be corrected within the data structure, and it shaped the financial propositions the business could access. SIC codes are still the underlying frame for AI categorisation across UK banking. Layering responsible AI on top of legacy bias is a structural threat to the flow of capital, not an opportunity. It is also precisely the kind of cross-cutting, long-horizon, value-chain question the sustainability function exists to hold.

“If sustainability-minded actors cede the AI conversation...

...the technology will be shaped by those whose primary interest is commercial return.”

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The AI Advantage



Supply chains and resilience.
The same AI tooling that measures a company's footprint can be turned into an instrument for supply chain resilience, a frame that lands more readily in boardrooms than "risk". When a major European retailer asked one provider for a carbon accounting tool, the same data revealed unexplained carbon spikes across its supply chain that also accounted for delivery delays the retailer had not been able to explain.



Imagination and the future made visible.

Imagination is a core but underused capability of the sustainability function, and AI offers a new instrument for it. By rendering desired futures at scale, for example restored temperate rainforests in the UK made visible to an executive in the room, visualisation makes the future concrete enough to mobilise the decisions and capital that get there.



Consensus-building.

AI agents can digest thousands of stakeholder views into a shared vision and play it back for iteration, finally making consensus-building tractable at scale. Live examples include an AI Accelerator programme with the Forest Stewardship Council, and a partnership with the conservation NGO RARE using a WhatsApp-based agent to support thousands of Colombian smallholder farmers with farm management nudges.

Company-specific AI models

Where AI is built, look to prefer company-specific small language models over default reliance on general-purpose large language models. This would mean the energy footprint would be materially lower, the governance surface narrower and the outputs likely to be more controllable.

None of this is a substitute for a properly thought through AI strategy. Rather it is a starting point that provides the kind of cross-cutting, technical-yet-systemic recommendation the sustainability function is well placed to make.



Everybody has been given the equivalent of a free jet to fly to the post office and back every day.

You don't need that. You need a small language model that is only trained on your data inside your company.



Not on all of the internet, which uses the energy of a light bulb.

‘Orchestration without ownership’

Beneath the structural and strategic questions sits a more human one. The CSO role is often asked to carry enterprise-wide responsibility without enterprise-wide authority. It is expected to influence finance, procurement, operations, communications, risk, human resources, technology and the board, while rarely commanding all the levers needed to deliver the outcomes for which it is held accountable.

That creates a distinctive kind of leadership pressure. The role requires fluency in multiple languages at once: the language of capital allocation, of regulation, of operational delivery, of employee belief, of customer behaviour and of public trust. It also requires the emotional resilience to keep moving when the topic is contested, misunderstood or quietly deprioritised.

Several participants described the work less as ownership and more as orchestration. The most effective CSOs are not those who keep sustainability close, but those who are able to hand it over without letting it disappear. They build internal coalitions, create the conditions for others to act, and then accept that success may look like the function becoming less visible as the business itself becomes more capable.

There is, however, a cost to that invisibility. Influence without authority can be lonely. It can mean carrying the long-term view in a short-term meeting, the systemic view in a functional structure, and the uncomfortable question in a room that wants a simpler answer. Peer support, senior sponsorship and clear executive ownership therefore matter not as professional niceties, but as conditions for the role to perform.

This is the human underside of integration. A sustainability strategy cannot be embedded by structure alone. It depends on leaders who can hold complexity without becoming paralysed by it, who can translate conviction into commercial relevance, and who can continue to act with judgement when the permission to do so has weakened.

“The most effective CSOs are not those who keep sustainability close, but those who hand it over.”

Success looks like the function becoming invisible as the business itself becomes more capable.

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‘Watchtower, not conscience’

All this leaves a question most consistently avoid: when does the Chief Sustainability Officer challenge the business model itself, not merely sharpen its delivery?

One CSO, asked directly whether the role was to be the conscience of her organisation, rejected the framing on the spot:

“Do not outsource that to me, thank you. I am not all conscience. We all have a conscience.”

She offered an alternative. The function’s value lies in being one of the few teams that looks right across the value chain, intersects with every part of the business, and has more knowledge of the data inside the firm than any other function. The label that emerged was not the conscience of the business, but the watchtower of the business, somebody in a high place who can look out further ahead to those risks.

The watchtower frame turns the function away from a moral framing that is unwelcome internally and back towards a strategic one that earns attention. It does not, however, settle the underlying question of what the watchtower is for. If the role exists to see further than other functions, it must occasionally see things the rest of the business does not want to look at. That conversation has not yet happened.

That is the work the next phase has to do. The case has sharpened; the permission has weakened; the function is mutating; the targets are slipping; AI is moving without us. The watchtower has plenty to look at.

‘United: Our Vibrant Places’ at Anthropy26



Recommendations

One phrase was unanimously felt to accurately reflect the CSO community today: ‘assembled guardians making sense for a regenerative future with limited resource’. So, as guardians, where to go from here? Here are seven recommendations for CSOs and Boards.

For CSOs and boards - **seven** directional recommendations:

1

Pair every risk frame with an opportunity frame in board materials and senior conversations. Risk earns ten minutes of attention; what is built in the eleventh is what determines whether the function still exists in 2030.

2

Treat integration with finance as a deliberate architecture, not as an inheritance from a reorganisation. Negotiate strategic capacity - horizon-scanning, cross-functional convening, external scanning - explicitly when the function moves under the CFO.

3

Push compliance back to where it belongs whenever possible. Use technology, in particular AI, in order to reclaim strategic and innovation bandwidth. The exception is tail-end supply-chain firms, for whom compliance is often the only available lever.

4

Value-creation frameworks at executive level are key. Owned by the executive, built into capital allocation. The discipline of the handover is the test, not the elegance of the framework.

5

Treat the supply chain’s sustainability transition as part of strategy, not as a tail risk. Mid-sized firms are ten to fifteen years behind on value-creation thinking; the leading firm’s transition is incomplete without theirs.

6

Galvanise a coordinated, honest 2030 reckoning through collaborations and multilateral organisations. This is an issue shared by all.

7

Do not ignore AI. It will make a real difference to your organisation’s impact and the sustainability function overall. Take the lead in a cross-functional collaboration to shape AI usage.

Acknowledgements and methodology

This communiqué is a synthesis of key takeaways from four closed-door chief sustainability officer dialogues held at Anthropy, in the Eden project Cornwall in March 2026.

The dialogues were held under the Chatham House rule throughout. Quotes are unattributed to individuals and verified against the session transcripts; participants and organisations are described generically. Pull quotes have been lightly edited for readability where verbatim oral phrasing did not survive transcription cleanly.

Particular thanks to the moderators of each dialogue, the lead protagonists who opened each session, and the participants who contributed openly under the Chatham House rule. The process was curated by Professor David Grayson with

support by Louise Kjellerup Roper of Volans, Hannah Pathak and Sally Uren OBE of Forum for the Future and Mark Goyder of Tomorrow's Company on behalf of Anthropy.

We thank all of our CSO contributors who are detailed within, for their willing support to engage in the conversations and subsequent consultations.

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About Anthropy

Anthropy brings together the UK's largest gathering of future-focused leaders and leading organisations to inspire a better Britain. Working with a cross-sector network, Anthropy facilitates changing practices, building new partnerships, influencing policy makers and transforming personal behaviour.

Anthropy is founded on the principle that the future is a shared responsibility, and at its core is a 3 day national gathering which takes place annually at the Eden Project in Cornwall, with 200+ sessions, led by 600+ speakers from over 1,000 organisations.

Anthropy is a cross sector organisational and individual membership organisation and further information can be found at www.anthropy.uk

Communiqué Participants

The individuals listed on these pages participated in one or more of the CSO dialogues held at Anthropy26 and contributed to the thinking that informed this communiqué.

While inclusion should not be taken as agreement with every observation, conclusion or recommendation contained within the report, it reflects their willingness to engage openly in a candid and constructive discussion about the future of sustainability leadership. Anthropy is deeply grateful for the time, expertise and insight they brought to these conversations.

Participants

Name	Role	Company Name
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Emily Landsborough	Head of ESG	Ibstock PLC

24 further Chief Sustainability & ESG officers participated and wish to remain anonymous.



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