

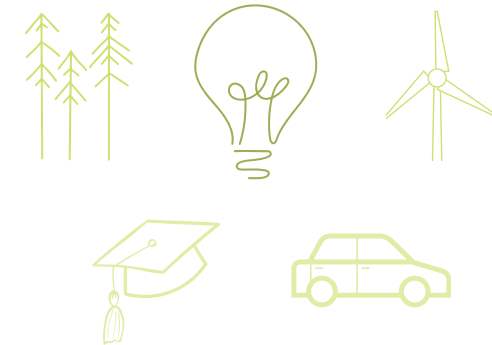
# The power of PR for the future of ESG

# What is ESG, and why is it important?

Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments are becoming increasingly connected to many organisations' core goals, and many PR professionals are finding themselves at forefront of these conversations.

As a result, ESG is no longer viewed as a niche set of values in PR, but essential and at the centre of understanding best practices in communications.

If professionals fail to authentically commit to furthering their knowledge and communicate in this area, it will not only lead to a decline in trust and reputational damage, but also means failing to drive the agenda as a whole.



## Our approach

We are having more and more conversations with both clients and fellow practitioners about how organisations are performing outside of their profits, and we can't see why this crucial insight can't be exchanged and spread further.

To start sharing this knowledge, we spoke to communications professionals already working within ESG, to see how their role has adapted by integrating sustainability, social value, and governance across PR strategies.

With ESG being a huge topic, we gave our contributors the freedom to express which aspects resonate most to them, so this resource can paint a picture of our industry and what is already being done.

We hope learning from the contributors' experiences will help encourage more practitioners to join these spaces.

Before speaking to those directly involved with the world of PR and communications, we spoke to an organisation whose sole focus is on helping organisations make more sustainable choices.

Manchester-based Postive Planet delivers solutions for businesses to connect 'profit with purpose', so sustainable goals are positioned the heart of how a company operates.

With research finding products marketed as sustainable grew 5.6 times faster than those that were not (*Forbes*, 2022), Positive Planet's founder is calling on PR and marketing to help communicate its importance. Stephen said:

***"Companies will invest more in sustainability in 2023, with more organisations recognising the long-term financial benefits of sustainable operations."***

***"There is growing pressure to act and make a positive difference for the planet and now more than ever it is vital to use marketing to have an impact."***

In 2022, the consultancy continued to find that sustainable companies were more agile to better withstand industry shakeups, leading to stronger growth and more satisfied customers.

In 2023, it expects to see broader conversations surrounding ESG, digital innovation, increased investment, and growing scrutiny surrounding green commitments.

***"It is the job of marketers and PR professionals to push sustainability into the mainstream."***

*Stephen Henry, co-founder,  
Positive Planet*

**positive  
planet**



**01** Sarah Calderbank  
Lake District National Park

**02** Gwen Sion  
Bangor University

**03** Rachel Lawrence  
SSE Renewables

**04** Natalie Geraghty  
Kier Highways

**05** Rebecca Zeitlin  
Levidian

**06** Anthony Bullick  
Outwrite PR

## How has ESG impacted your role?



**Sarah Calderbank Chart. PR MCIPR**  
Assistant Head of Communications  
*Lake District National Park*

Sarah has worked at the National Park for more than eight years, and describes her role as helping people 'learn, love and understand more about the Lake District'.

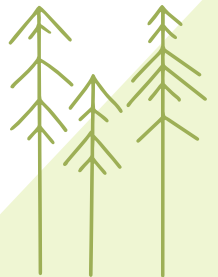
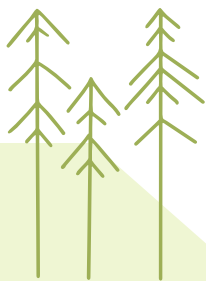
The environment has always been at the heart of my role at the Lake District National Park – our communications work informs and inspires the millions of people who enjoy this special place.

In recent years our strategies have evolved to ensure people can play a greater role.

We work in partnership with many organisations, communities, visitor economy and governance to tackle the opportunities of an ESG approach.

Our current five-year management plan for the park centres around five linked key challenges, such as our goal to be a net zero national park by 2037, with the role nature can play and encouraging people to care for their natural environment.

***I expect the appetite for environmental and social stories to continue. We find the greatest impact for environmental stories are those where they affect real people, not just abstract terms.***



# Sarah's tips



- **Keep it simple:** if you're new to ESG, don't let it overwhelm your message. The simplicity of the plastic straw campaign created huge impact for single-use plastic reduction.
- **Social proof:** remember the 'real life' connection. Small steps make it easier to digest. For example, introducing ideas such as: meat-free Mondays, walk to work Wednesdays, one less flight, volunteer tree planting.
- **Recognise eco-anxiety:** celebrate the small wins too; it all counts.
- **Authentic voices:** lived behaviours and user-generated content creates impact.
- **Lead by example:** use your platform for good to advocate and show the way. Have you considered introducing flexible working, reducing printing, volunteer days, ethical sourcing, or ESG contracts?



*I hope that ESG supports the continuation of the professionalism of PR, which we have seen increase in the past 10 years. I'm pleased to see most practitioners now taking an ethical approach and driving standards. ESG will be a crucial part of this continued journey.*



## Why do you think it is important for PR professionals to get involved?

Whether you're working in the environment sector or not, the opportunities for communicators to get involved with ESG is significant. As David Attenborough said on Instagram in 2020: 'Saving our planet is now a communications challenge'.

As PR professionals, we are the storytellers and we can help build trust in businesses, avoiding 'greenwashing' and finding ways to demonstrate transparency on ESG.

## How did you initially come across ESG?



**Gwen Sion MCIPR**  
Communications Officer  
*Bangor University*

Gwen has worked in a variety of public and private sector PR roles for more than 20 years, and is now part of the communications team at Bangor University. She holds a CIPR Diploma and Advanced Certificate.

When I started out in PR, it was all about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and what activities your organisation was voluntarily undertaking for the benefit of people and planet.

Handing over donations, volunteering in the community, recycling rates – that kind of thing.

*Now, customers, stakeholders and regulators are rightly demanding more transparency as they decide whether to engage with your organisation.*

*They require evidence and data to back up those declarations of purpose and values.*

There should be as small a 'legitimacy gap' as possible between what you articulate and what you do, and good comms will demonstrate that.

I try to weave the evidence of these 'lived values' into all my comms activity. After all, I want our audiences to believe and trust our institution, to feel its integrity. And to reach trust? Well...that requires accountability.





*Whatever institution or organisation you're communicating on behalf of, your impact in terms of ESG should be playing a part as you formulate your messaging.*

*It's part of knowing your brand and being authentic.*

## Gwen's tips



- **Look at your organisation's work through an ESG lens.** There will probably be more good news stories than you think! A map or flowchart can be a useful reference in your PR planning.
- **People like to hear about people.** If you want to promote a new pledge or initiative, give examples of the impact it has or will have. Show, don't tell.
- **Use data.** This backs up what you say and immediately gives stories more weight than anecdotal evidence, and avoids any claims of greenwashing.
- **As a member of the CIPR, I refer to the code of conduct** whenever I feel I need to make an ethical decision. Check out the resources and training available.
- **Make things really come alive.** I've seen so many small but perfectly formed stories do well because all the ducks are in a row - the high-quality images, the video clips, the news story and use of socials. It takes work and forward planning, but if you know you've got something worth shouting about, the preparation will pay dividends.

**Rachel Lawrence**

Community Engagement Manager  
*SSE Renewables*

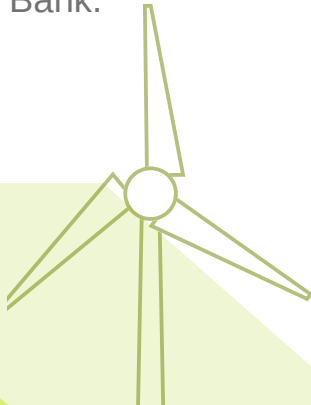
After 13 years in the European steel industry, Rachel now leads on stakeholder engagement during the construction of the world's biggest offshore wind farm, Dogger Bank.

## What is key when carrying out ESG activity?

As a community engagement manager working on national infrastructure projects in renewable energy, environmental and social impact are at the heart of everything I do.

***We're building the assets that will help tackle some of the biggest environmental and social challenges of our generation, and our stakeholders want to know we're doing it safely and sustainably.***

Having access to accurate data is key to this, as well as being able to share this information with audiences in a compelling and engaging way.



# Rachel's tips

- **Ask questions and seek different perspectives.** Environmental and social issues are rarely straightforward and listening to different opinions can be a great way to shape new ideas.
- **Listen to what your stakeholders are saying** about these issues rather than making assumptions based on status quo.
- **Collaborate with your suppliers and partners.** Working together on shared ideologies is a great way to achieve better outputs.
- **Human interest never fails to engage.** Find out how lives are better because of environmental and social impact.
- **Be part of the story.** There are some great opportunities to get involved in projects that are shaping our future that are both challenging and rewarding.



Do you think the rise of ESG will permanently alter how PR operates?

I don't think so. The fundamentals of PR are the same, it's just that environmental and social impact are higher up the agenda where they belong.

Our job as communications professionals is to help our clients to share accurate information in a compelling way.

We have an opportunity-of-a-lifetime to make the difference for future generations by giving these issues the attention they deserve and enabling positive change.

## Has ESG altered your role in any way?



**Natalie Geraghty MCIPR**  
Head of Communications *Kier Highways*

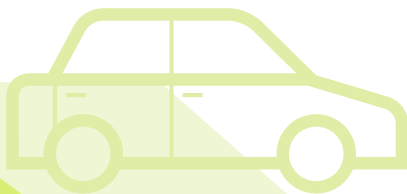
Working for Kier for more than 10 years, Natalie is responsible for driving customer focus and leading on communicating the highways business strategy to clients and employees.

ESG has always been a big part of my role at Kier Highways, and the overall Kier Group. It's at the heart of our purpose. It's just that we've known it in another guise.

Environmental and social are two main themes in our sustainability strategy and then governance has been mostly known as compliance.

Communicating about our impact as a business on communities, environments and that we are doing the right thing as an organisation has been front and centre of my role for around the last four years.

***I think it's important to recognise that  
ESG has always been there.***





How do you expect  
ESG will impact  
your role for the  
next 12 months?

Decarbonisation of the transport sector is a hot topic for the industry. It's important that we (our business) are involved in that conversation. I'd say most of our annual communications plan focuses on ESG topics.

I think the biggest impact for my team and I will be to have our ears and eyes open even wider to insights around how ESG is reported and how it's being perceived.

And then to ensure those that have responsibility in communicating have a very thorough understanding of carbon literacy, and ESG data, as we look to communicate clearly and transparently to different stakeholders.

***We don't expect our workforce to read a 20-page strategy and then figure it out. We have to make it accessible and relatable, especially if we are trying to change mindsets.***

## Natalie's tips

- **Listen and read as much as possible.** Media First has a great podcast called the Media Landscape. It isn't directly focused on ESG, but on what is trending that week. There is always something useful there.
- **Make friends with a chartered environmentalist!** Your circle of trust should include someone who can help you translate and improve your carbon literacy.
- **Information verification** is important all the time but when it comes to ESG, it's a top priority.
- **Train from a registered body.** I'm about to embark on the CIPR's new diploma on sustainability comms.
- **Consider all views and the "what ifs".** Those who aren't in PR often might find the constant questioning or challenges, a little obstructive. But it's better to have that than face a PR crisis!

## What does ESG look like in your role?



**Rebecca Zeitlin Chart. PR MCIPR**  
Marketing Director *Levidian*

Overseeing the marketing strategy, Rebecca plays an integral role in communicating the company's vision of a decarbonised future. Rebecca is also the PRCA co-chair of the Misinformation and the Climate Crisis Working Group, a board member for the CIPR, and chairs the Professional Practices Committee.

ESG is a core aspect of my role. What I learned very early on is that as it gets to be on everyone's radar, everyone will have an opinion about what is right or wrong, and also what is acceptable for an organisation to deliver.

***Ignore the outside noise and spend time  
defining what ESG needs to be for you –  
instead of what the world says it is.***

Make your goals and objectives relevant to you, and ensure it aligns with your company purpose.

Nobody starts as an expert on anything, including ESG. Pick items that are pertinent to your work and start learning there.



# Rebecca's tips

- **Trust your gut and your instinct.** If you have a funny feeling about a message or a claim, explore it. You will be right most of the time.
- **Start small.** ESG is enormous. Start within the boundaries of your organisation. You can't solve the climate crisis by yourself. Demonstrate value with the small things and then grow to the bigger things.
- **If you find yourself having an interest** in a particular topic of ESG while educating yourself, do a deep dive on it.
- **Don't be too righteous.** It is possible for a business to do ESG well and be profitable.
- **You won't get 100 per cent satisfaction in every area from one job.** That's ok! Be mercenary about what's most important to you and follow those things – ESG work exists in every sector.



How do you expect the relationship between ESG and PR to evolve?

Over the next 12 months, external factors will change the way ESG happens and is communicated.

As PR people, we have to be agile to adapt to a changing landscape effectively, driving the conversation both internally and externally.



**Anthony Bullick Chart. PR MCIPR**  
Managing Director *Outwrite PR*

With 11 years of experience, Anthony has led on award-winning integrated marketing and PR campaigns in the renewables sector, as well as chaired ESG events.



## Why is it important for PR to get involved?

We stay on top of the latest trends and best practices and techniques to ensure clients receive the best possible advice and consultancy from us.

It's vital for PR professionals to include ESG in their comms strategy as it impacts what people think about the brand you work for.

***The role of PR in an organisation is to be its conscience, and the three pillars of environment, social, and governance are critical to build genuine trust.***

ESG activity will come in all shapes and sizes; whether it's a listed company publishing an ESG report, or an SME sharing a quarterly story about its support in the community.





## What does ESG look like in your role?

We partner with brands of all sizes in a number of different sectors and the main difference has been collating all existing activity and content into one area under the ESG label.

We're really fortunate and work with clients who have historically aimed to do the right thing by the environment, support communities, and ensure good governance at board level.

ESG has allowed these types of businesses to neatly package up their approach to thinking beyond profits.

*As the phrase ESG is relatively new to many, we have spent a lot of time educating clients and contacts what it actually means for them.*

## Anthony's tips

- **No one expects the organisation you work for to do it all.** It's virtually impossible to make a difference across every initiative and programme that exists worldwide. Focus on what's important to your stakeholders and do this really well.
- **Integrate ESG topics into your professional development.** The same goes for you professionally! ESG is such a large topic that for your own sanity, just focus on areas that interest you.
- **Education is likely needed internally.** Spend time bringing key people up to speed. All colleagues should take notice as the subsections of ESG are impacting sales, recruitment and operations.
- **Be wary of greenwashing.** Double and triple-check stats. Make sure wording is crystal clear and not open to misinterpretation.
- **Start now.** There is no 'perfect' time. If you are starting from scratch, build quarterly content such as web stories and social media content into your content plan.



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