

Article

Driving Change towards Sustainability in Public Bodies and Civil Society Organisations: Expert Interviews with UK Practitioners

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Abstract: While public bodies and civil society organisations play an important role in the transition towards a more sustainable society, there has been very limited research on how to make these institutions more sustainable. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to generate insights on processes and patterns of change towards sustainability, and to identify effective practices that might be transferred and adapted to different institutional contexts. The research followed an organisational change framework and a qualitative exploratory design. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced sustainability practitioners working at leading organisations in the UK. Thematic analysis of the data revealed three overarching themes: knowledge and reflection, support and engagement, and driving and enabling change. From this, a framework for effective practice was developed, highlighting the importance of (i) explicitly linking organisational understanding to working practices through frequent and deliberate reflection; (ii) developing a support base that provides expertise and legitimacy; and (iii) using context-specific strategies for implementing planned changes, as well as supporting emergent change throughout organisational sub-systems.

Keywords: organisational change management for sustainability; civil society organisations; public bodies



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1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of steadily increasing risks from climate change and environmental degradation, advancing sustainable development has become more urgent than ever [1]. Public bodies and civil society organisations (CSOs), such as local government bodies, faith-based organisations, health care providers, and educational institutions, play a particularly important role in the transition towards a more sustainable society.

They have the ability to drive social change by shaping values, attitudes, and behaviours of their primary stakeholders, which includes both those who deliver their core business as well as their users, such as local residents, congregants, patients, and students [2–6].

The extraordinary reach and potential of these organisations comes from a number of key characteristics, including:

- The large number and high fluctuation rate of their primary stakeholders;
- The fact that they engage with them at points of important change, for instance when moving house, starting school, or having an accident or illness [7];
- Being employers to some of the country's most trusted professionals, such as nurses, doctors, teachers, and scientists [8,9].

While public bodies and CSOs have large potential for influencing societal change, integrating sustainability into their structures, culture, and core activities is a complex and challenging endeavour due to characteristics such as:

- Budget constraints and cost pressures which come from demands not related to sustainability [10,11];

- A decentralised or distributed organisational structure, multiple sub-cultures, and little consistency throughout the organisation, which hinders top-down decisions from turning into change in organisational sub-systems [12–14];
- An inconsistent building stock and an expensive and historical legacy of buildings [15–17].

To find ways to overcome these barriers, the purpose of this study is to generate insights on processes and patterns of organisational change towards sustainability in public bodies and CSOs in the UK.

To do so, this study is grounded within an organisational change management framework. Organisational change research investigates change contexts, content, processes, and leadership [18,19], and allows for drawing on different theoretical concepts, including complexity theory, organisational power politics, and culture [20]. This enables the generation of critical insights into the interactions between people and organisational structures and how this shapes organisational behaviour and performance [21]. Change management research, on the other hand, offers techniques for moving organisations from a current into a more desired future state [22], which is particularly useful for extracting implications for practice and further exploration [23].

Although an organisational change management framework is well-suited to provide crucial understanding, apart from higher education institutions [24], studies on organisational change towards sustainability in public bodies and CSOs are very scarce [25].

Scoping the peer-reviewed literature for studies investigating change in local government bodies, faith-based organisations, health care providers, and primary or secondary education institutions published up to the year 2019 resulted in next to no relevant results. Notable exceptions are [26–28] for local government bodies, [29] for faith-based organisations, and [4,30,31] for health care providers.

To address this gap in the literature, this study aims to provide understanding on (i) how sustainability practitioners experience and perceive processes of change towards sustainability in their organisations and (ii) what strategies and tactics they use to implement change, and, from this, (iii) to develop a framework for effective practice that might be transferred and adapted to different institutional contexts.

To achieve this, a qualitative exploratory design using semi-structured expert interviews was adopted since it is ideal for obtaining rich information in complex and little-known topics.

2. Theoretical Framework

By building on previous research on organisational change in the public sector, and particularly in higher education institutions, this study investigates change context, content, processes, and leadership.

Context factors describe the external and internal forces or circumstances that influence organisational change processes [32]. Increased pressure from society to address sustainability issues is an example of external forces, and the availability of resources and staff is an example of internal circumstances. Change management focusses mostly on changes at the intra-organisational level generated by deliberate actions of change agents [33]. That said, organisations are not islands, and including contexts can generate important insights into common drivers for and barriers to change, as well as cross-sectoral developments that might affect organisations [34].

Content factors delineate the target of change, such as organisational systems, structures, or activities [32]. This article focusses on the diverse range of strategies and tactics that practitioners use to integrate sustainability into organisational activities and structures. Moreover, it also aims to shed a light on the underlying rationales for choosing and prioritising certain strategies and tactics over others, as this allows for better understanding and learning of effective practices [35].

Process factors describe how change is brought about by examining different types of change, for instance, planned or emergent change, and ‘human factors’ that can significantly impact change processes, such as organisational culture, communication, and perceptions

of and resistance to change [19,24,36]. Process factors are another research focus of this study, since change towards sustainability is not only about what is done, but also how it is done [37].

Leadership factors distinguish between different kinds of change agents, for instance, senior executives or faculty staff acting as sustainability champions, as well as types of change agency, such as vertical or distributed leadership [38]. Leadership factors can shape organisational change processes [39], and good leadership is stated as a key factor for change towards sustainability [40].

3. Materials and Methods

Semi-structured expert interviews were chosen as the research method, since they are well-suited for exploring complex social issues [41,42], and yield rich information on perceptions and attitudes shaping interviewees' experiences [43]. Semi-structured interviews are well-established in the social sciences for qualitative exploratory purposes, and they usually follow a question guide drafted by the researcher, which provides a general structure while also allowing for unanticipated themes to emerge as the conversation progresses [44].

Ten organisations in the South of England with a strong commitment to sustainability, demonstrated through allocation of significant resources for and public recognition of sustainability efforts, were selected. Potential interviewees were chosen based on their expertise, organisational understanding, and responsibility for the sustainability agenda.

After establishing a pool of suitable organisations and candidates, purposive sampling [41,42] was used to cover a range of diverse organisations and practitioners. A total of six interviews were conducted between mid-February and the first week of March 2020. While the small sample might be a limitation, this can be mitigated by conducting rigorous, purposive sampling that ensures a diverse group of participants [45]. In the case of this study, the sample achieved covers diverse organisations in terms of sector, scope, and number of staff, and it had an excellent balance of practitioners in terms of seniority level and gender (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of interviewees and organisations.

Name	Seniority Level	Sector	Scope of Organisation	No. of Staff
James	Senior level	Health	Governing	<100
Robert	Mid-level	Faith	Governing	100–500
Olivia	Project-level	Primary education	Individual	<100
Emma	Mid-level	Higher education	Individual	100–500
Ava	Project-level	Faith	Individual	<100
John	Mid-level	Higher education	Individual	>1000

Five interviews were conducted face-to-face and one via Skype, lasting on average between 55 and 65 min. All participants were asked the same principal twenty questions concerning change strategies and tactics, organisational culture, leadership and change agents, and communication and engagement. However, breadth and depth of coverage depended on each interviewee's job remit, as well as on their experience of and expertise on different topics. Interviews were recorded with a handheld voice recorder, and transcribed using an adapted intelligent verbatim approach [46,47], and interviewees were sent their transcripts for verification. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants. The data was analysed using an adapted form of thematic analysis [42,48] (see Figure 1).

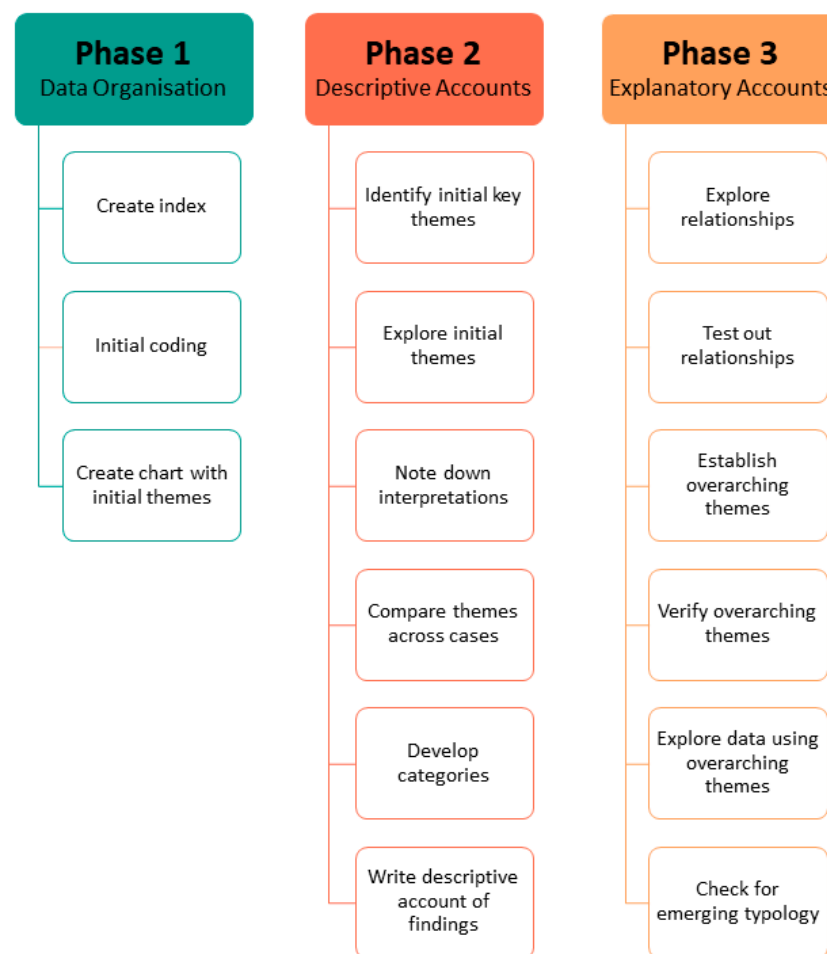


Figure 1. Process of organising and analysing data [42,48].

The first phase consisted of organisation of and familiarisation with the data, and during the second phase, a number of themes worthy of further exploration were identified. For instance, all interviewees talked about internal and external stakeholders, but they did so in distinct ways in relation to their views on organisational change. Therefore, internal and external stakeholders became one of the initial key themes to be examined. Other initial key themes included types of change, groups and individuals, human factors, and change strategies and tactics. These initial themes were further explored by defining and progressively updating sub-themes, and interpreting the data contained within each sub-theme. From this, a descriptive account of the findings was drafted.

During the third phase, the initial key themes were mapped against each other and searched for possible relationships between different parts of the data. These were examined by testing back with the raw data and, through an inductive process, overarching themes were established and refined. From this, a typology and a framework for effective practice was developed. Change in large organisational systems is complex, and any orderly narrative of cause and effect is usually only possible in hindsight, and even then, often reductionist in nature [49]. While this was mitigated by the fact that all interviewees were experts with excellent organisational understanding, having a two-layered analysis which produces descriptive and exploratory accounts further enhances the credibility of results.

After finishing the data analysis, a research quality check was conducted [42], which included triangulating the results with the interviewees. To ensure transparency, this article adhered to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) [50], and a detailed account of the entire analysis process, as well as outputs from each analysis step, were compiled to form a trail of evidence.

4. Results

From the thematic analysis, three overarching themes emerged:

1. Professional knowledge and reflection;
2. Stakeholder support and engagement;
3. Driving and enabling change.

It is extremely difficult to neatly tabulate the whole spectrum of individual positions, perceptions, concepts, and strategies unearthed by the interviews. First, there was a certain overlap across these themes. This reflects the complex nature of organisational change and the fact that experiences and perceptions are rarely expressed as isolated concepts that can be separated from each other. Second, the framework is somewhat reduced considering the richness of the findings. However, this was a necessity to make the article accessible and preserve the practical value of the framework. A more detailed insight into the underpinnings of the framework can be found in the trail of evidence.

4.1. Professional Knowledge and Reflection

Interviewees demonstrated a high level of professional knowledge, that is, an excellent understanding of organisational structures, contexts, and stakeholders. However, there were differences in terms of how this knowledge was made explicit and linked to strategies and tactics used for leading change. There were several factors that seemed to facilitate regular and explicit connection of knowledge and working practice.

First, frequent reflection, which includes deliberate evaluation of actions, seeking feedback from others, and continuous learning and adaptation:

“[...] we thought it was very important to be externally scrutinised, not just by other health professionals, but by similar people in other sectors.” James

“[...] and every time you get the opportunity to have a new staff member, because we’re quite transient staff community [...], it does give you the opportunity to go, hang on a minute, are we going to do this differently? Are we going to do it the same and sort of refocus?” Emma

Second, a good understanding of one’s implicit knowledge base underpinning strategies to drive change, and the ability to take the perspective of others:

“That was a very common question: do you have any, what is your theory of change? And it’s a question we asked ourselves a lot, and ultimately the answer was, we have many theories of change. But we need to use the right theory of change [...] in the right setting, at the right opportunity.” James

“And there are situations in which objectives compete. And sometimes I mean, I can think of one instance [...] where I did decide to push very hard [...] and to say that on this, the environment prevails. [...]. And I did succeed in that. But I’m very sparing about doing that. If I tried to do that all the time, I would alienate people. Robert

Third, although this varied widely amongst participants, familiarity with concepts from organisational change management:

“Most people were fascinated in the skills and the knowledge about how to change things. So, if you ask me [...], what did I learn in 10 years, I learned almost nothing about climate change because I sort of knew it already. I was picking it up anyway. [...]. I learned about communication, engagement and managing change.” James

Implicit theories about how change happens can be effective, too, particularly when derived from experience and organisational understanding. However, not examining biases and assumptions about change can delay learning and progress in certain contexts.

“[...] it honestly probably took me [...] years to really understand how this place makes decisions. And I think that is again, that’s just a university thing.

Generally, it's just the way that decisions are made here are by committee and that is not what I was used to where I worked before." John

4.2. Stakeholder Support and Engagement

Interviewees engaged with different stakeholder groups across the organisation to develop a support base. This proved to be crucial for obtaining backing, influence, and authority for the sustainability agenda. Different types of support base were identified. First, key stakeholders, including senior management and gatekeepers, internal experts, and committed individuals:

"So, I've been lucky because the head who was here before, he's moved up as head of primary. So, he's taken that, we've greened him up, and he's taken that with him. [. . .]. And he's basically had dialogue with all the heads. So, I've had support from you know, head of primary, which is amazing." Olivia

"So, for example, at the time, I said to HR: "It would be really cool if we put sustainability into everyone's job descriptions, I'll write the sentence for you can we just add in?" And [. . .], they're like: "Okay." [. . .]. If you have relationships with people, then you can, you can kind of ask for things." Emma

Second, a critical mass of internal stakeholders who are receptive to or push for change towards sustainability:

"What then happened is, that strategy, we went through a consultation period with students and staff last year, and the environmental sustainability piece, was really, really well supported [. . .]. So initially, sustainability was intended to mean economic sustainability with a little bit of environmental sustainability. And actually, the focus has sort of really shifted much more to environmental sustainability [. . .]." John

"One person is a crank, two people is a pressure group three people is staff opinion, numbers matter. Okay? And then get your story straight, get your narrative straight, don't compete, collaborate, go and visit the chief executive in packs [. . .]." James

Third, dedicated networks or groups that actively drive change in organisational sub-systems:

"And then we formatted some of our work around it becoming a green team with leadership positions and if you wanted that, but also, it's about bringing like-minded students together to form projects and ideas." Emma

"[. . .] so, getting representatives from each class, so they can have a voice, a bit like the school council that we have, sort of local democracy in school [. . .]. So, if we need to reduce food waste, we'll, you know, I'll ask them questions and then they'll come up with ideas [. . .]. So that just kind of, it is led by the kids really and what they notice in school, so they realise people aren't recycling, then they sort that out." Olivia

Each interviewee had a unique configuration of stakeholders forming their support base. For instance, one had passive support from key stakeholders and the wider organisation, and a dedicated group implementing change, whereas another enjoyed active support from key stakeholders and a large part of internal stakeholders, but did not have a network of sustainability champions. Some interviewees could easily transform an existing pool of supporters and advocates to form a support base when starting at their organisation, whereas others had to consolidate their support base through continuous work from the ground up.

Interviewees used a range of strategies and tactics to develop a support base. First, listening to stakeholders to better understand how to frame communications, but also to understand issues that mattered to them:

“So, I guess one of our biggest models of change was listening to people. [. . .] my theory was [. . .], if you listen to someone long enough, they’ll tell you what their values are and thus you could adapt your model of change to fit their values.” James

“And then just every time you know, the students will come and challenge us on different things. So, we’ll think more about palm oil and then you’re like: oh, um, let’s go do something on palm oil. Or, you know, the plastics and periods that came from student ideas and student dissertation work. And we went: all right, can we now stock like a reusable [menstrual] cup in?” Emma

Second, using tailored, strategic, and goal-oriented communications:

“[. . .] now that we’re setting carbon targets, people are talking about carbon rather than sustainability. And like, that’s slightly changing the language. And so, it’s only fair that we almost go back and go: “Does everybody, is everyone comfortable with this language?” And, you know, [. . .], we’re not all that comfortable with it. So how can we like re-educate ourselves to be able to just rephrase some of the things that we’re doing in that context.” Emma

“[. . .] our model of change for the public, which was to do continuous surveys to show that actually, you are not alone in wanting this change. You’re not odd, you’re not a maverick, this is quite normal to want this sort of change, but it won’t happen by individuals, it has to happen by collective action.” James

Third, empowering the support base to drive change, for instance through training or mentoring systems, by providing resources, or helping them to obtain legitimacy:

“[. . .] the other kids are a bit younger, and they can’t quite cope with the excitement in the classroom. But the older kids will go mentor them. So, they’ll go down and chat to them about what we’ve been talking about in our meetings. And then the kids deliver assemblies and do the lessons [. . .]” Olivia

“[. . .] for the schools, frankly, one of the key interests is we have money to tackle some of these things that actually have often long been an issue for them.” John

Having a strong support base within the organisation seems to be one of the key requirements for implementing change. Where interviewees lacked a solid base of support, effectiveness and permanence of change seemed to be compromised in certain areas:

“It’s really probably quite important to say that if I walked away now, I think the, you know, the ongoing structures are not in place, there are not enough people who are educated enough or keen enough or any of that. We’ve got, the policy framework is good. [. . .] but you just, you need that, you need the driver, and you need the education [. . .]. So that is a real weakness in terms of change management, I would say. It’s a fantastic team, the eco team, but none of them are going to step into what I do.” Ava

4.3. Driving and Enabling Change

Interviewees used a mix of strategies to drive bottom-up change or enable change from the top, dependent mostly on their authority and legitimacy to act, and their organisation’s stage of change towards sustainability. Several strategies seemed to be particularly impactful for popularising sustainability at the beginning of the change journey. First, establishing monitoring mechanisms, for instance through repeated surveys, but also in the form of placing stakeholders in positions where they could obtain and relay information on what happened in organisational sub-systems:

“[. . .] we did plenty of Ipsos Mori surveys of patients, and they basically thought what we were doing was a really good idea. And the reason we did that was because a lot of people when you go back to one of your earlier questions about barriers, a lot of people, like doctors and nurses and managers, said: we’re not

doing this because patients don't want it. So, I said: how do you know patients don't want it? You haven't asked them. We asked them. We did a survey, and they say they want it." James

"[...] so, the representatives from each class come along to green team meetings [...]. [...] And then when we come together, we talk about what we've been doing in class, what topics we're covering, so everyone knows what, you know, people are studying in school so that we can think about how we can help them out." Olivia

Second, identifying allies within the organisation, for instance, by locating stakeholders to collaborate on specific projects or using events to recruit and connect people into advocacy groups:

"The second thing I did was keep an absolute rigorous database of everybody I ever met [...]. This was an absolute Golden Rule. You must keep records of everybody you meet [...] in a central database [...]. So, people will come up and say: I'm all alone in this hospital. And I said: no, you're not, there are five other people. These are their names and emails, meet them for coffee. You know, get together, hunt in packs." James

"[...] but it's finding the staff, so I stood up at a whole trust inset, which is like [...] odd staff [...]. Just like: if anyone's interested, come see me lunch time." Olivia

Third, acting in a strategic and structured way. While most interviewees took an action-driven approach when they started at their organisation, by reflecting on and evaluating their efforts, they moved towards a more systematic way of leading change efforts:

"I would love to say with hindsight [...]: yes, there was a strategy and it looked like this. But in the moment, I was a new manager as well. It was the first time I was managing a proper team in that way. [...]. And then that has actually become more strategic over time for sure." Emma

"[...] I think the structures that we've put in place in terms of management systems and formal reporting has caught a lot of structure [...]. But then it is, behind the scenes, some of that can sort of seem a bit ad hoc in terms of individual initiatives or ideas or opportunities. But again, thinking about the science labs site, that has been us talking to a few informed people in the labs to understand different opportunities, explore opportunities, and then bringing that into our more structured management system." John

When interviewees had more power or the organisation had become more advanced in terms of sustainability, they used different strategies to make sustainability a formal and integrated part of organisational structures and culture. First, interviewees increased participation, for instance, through different forms of consultation or collaborations, or by enabling emergent change occurring in organisational sub-systems:

"[...] every school and function have been tasked with thinking about what they're going to do about sustainability in their area, a bit like you would have to do for health and safety. [...]. And that's opening up some really interesting conversations [...]." John

"[...] we need to start from a point where people are bought in, through genuinely knowing more, but also being excited and inspired to want to change. And I've really seen a change of like, you know, commercial staff now were like, so proud of the changes they're making in, you know, in the shop. And they're owning that project [...]." Emma

Second, efforts to embed sustainability into organisational structures to ensure a lasting impact. Some interviewees explicitly considered permanence of change when undertaking

a project, whereas others seemed to take a more intuitive approach, anchoring sustainability into existing structures through a consecutive flow of small changes:

“And essentially, just sort of, again, for me, I think the best tactic of change is, do something and then make it the business as usual. [. . .]. But you’ve got to do it first to then be like: oh, last year we did this. So, we do it again. And that’s what we do every year” Emma

“And just seeing whether there were opportunities to drop in an extra little bit, bolt on something rather than sort of, everyone must teach sustainability as a separate subject. [. . .]. So yeah, it’s just kind of woven in over the years, it’s become part of what we do [. . .].” Olivia

Third, long-term, big-picture thinking. This ranged from interviewees being very explicit and specific about how to implement profound changes to their organisation’s DNA, and others talking about the challenges to systemic change, but being less confident when thinking about how to tackle them:

“I suppose the other model of change [. . .] which is very important to us, which is the idea of back casting [. . .]. If you work backwards and say, if we need to be there, within 25–30 years, we need to get to this point within five years or three years or so, this is what we need to do today.” James

“One thing I’ve said in this interview, which I constantly feel it necessary to heavily qualify, is the notion that a lot of small action adds up to a greater whole. Well, it does, but [. . .] we need to do far, far more, we need to do so much more that it does actually involve not small changes but really larger radical changes, which is precisely what people don’t want to face. So, I posed a problem there [. . .] rather than the answer.” Robert

In some cases, interviewees made efforts to increase participation and embedding changes while still driving change from the bottom up, and in others, interviewees kept looking for allies across the organisation even after having a solid support base. However, there are patterns in the data indicating that certain strategies are helpful in accelerating change at the beginning, whereas others seem to be more effective when led from the top at a later stage, as they require resources, time, and authority.

5. Discussion

From the three overarching themes outlined in the previous section, a framework for effective practice was developed (see Figure 2) which includes three interconnected areas: knowledge and reflection, support and engagement, and driving and enabling change. The three framework areas influence each other, and the elements within each area are interlinked as well.

The first framework area, knowledge and reflection, focusses on expertise and skills that enable practitioners to implement change. An interesting finding here is that this framework area coincides with key competencies attributed to effective change agents in the management literature, such as organisational knowledge, interpersonal skills, understanding of power politics, and self-reflection [51,52].

Apart from this, there are two fields of research and practice that highlight the importance of connecting knowledge, action, and reflection for effectively leading change. One of them is reflective practice, which describes an analytical process that integrates knowledge, experiences, and other people’s views to enhance learning and decision-making competencies [53]. While reflective practice is mostly used in the fields of education and health care [54,55], it can be applied across a range of professions [56]. There are multiple studies linking reflection to areas such as organisational learning, development, and leadership [53,57,58], and emphasising the need for reflective approaches to better understand power relationships [59].

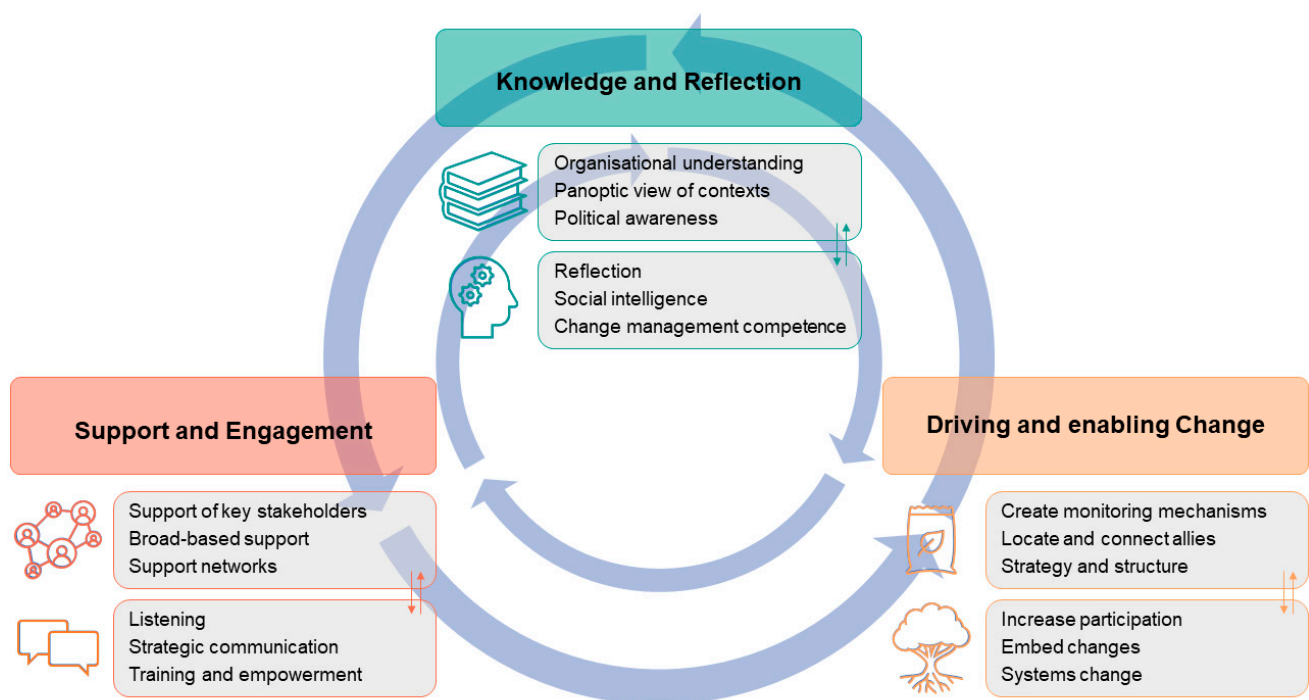


Figure 2. A framework for effective change management in CSOs and public bodies.

The other related field is action research, which aims to address social and organisational issues through the cyclical processes of research, planning, implementation, and evaluation of change, and active participation of the researcher and research subjects [60]. Action research has a long tradition as a methodology in the social and organisational change literature [61,62] and there are numerous studies emphasising the value of action research for organisational change towards sustainability [63,64]. Within the context of public bodies and CSOs, the value of critical reflection, learning-by-doing, and participatory approaches is also stressed for facilitating organisational learning, embedding sustainability into organisational structures, and systematic, institution-wide change [65–67].

While one of the premises of this study was that expert knowledge is important for effective change management, the findings also highlight that it is key to make this knowledge explicit when formulating change strategies and tactics, and to constantly adapt and enhance organisational understanding through self-reflection, feedback, and evaluation of actions. As outlined above, these concepts are not new to the general organisational change literature, but in the context of embedding sustainability in public bodies and CSOs, they are not well researched and lack practical application [35,68].

The second framework area, support and engagement, is concerned with the role of internal stakeholders, the importance of building and maintaining a support base within the organisation, and the strategies and actions for gaining stakeholder attention and support. Since organisations consist of people structured around a specific purpose, it is not surprising that people and how they interact with organisational structures play a significant role in defining the performance of an organisation [21].

The interviews echo the findings from multiple studies analysing organisational change for sustainability in higher education institutions, where the focus is often on committed individuals [69] who are portrayed as key players driving change [59]. In the same body of literature, securing support from senior management is a common theme [70,71], as is the idea of having backing from primary stakeholders such as students and staff [72,73].

It is interesting to notice that while interviewees talked about securing support, influence, and legitimacy, there was no mention of organisational politics. This also seems to be a trend in the literature examining change at higher education institutions, where case

studies highlight the importance of understanding power structures, but do not explicitly link to the literature on power politics and political behaviours in organisations [59]. This apparent gap is surprising, since change towards sustainability requires a shift in working practices, management structures, and values, which in turn challenges established norms and power structures and thus triggers political behaviours [74].

With regard to engagement, the effectiveness of listening and establishing bi-directional communication channels as a part of a strategic approach to communication is a recurring theme in the literature [75–77]. Similarly, multiple studies highlight the importance of empowering supporters to drive change. For instance, institutionalising bottom-up structures increases mutual support, a sense of belonging and identity, and hence facilitates the integration of sustainability into organisational culture [40,72,78].

Communication, engagement, and involvement have been discussed extensively in the organisational change literature [79], for instance, to reduce resistance [80] or increase uptake of pro-environmental behaviours [81]. That said, the findings of the present study indicate that in the context of public bodies and CSOs, engagement is often guided by the intent to develop and enhance a support base that provides additional resources, expertise, and legitimacy to the sustainability agenda. One reason for this might be that, in public bodies and CSOs, power is divided amongst various individuals and groups, and backing from senior stakeholders alone is not enough to implement change [13,82].

The third framework area, driving and enabling change, emphasises the importance of contexts for effective practice. It highlights the strategies practitioners use to accelerate the transition from a stage of emergent towards more formalised and planned change. Furthermore, it sheds light on how practitioners manage the interplay between top-down and bottom-up change once the sustainability agenda has reached a certain popularity.

As suggested by previous research, change towards sustainability can progress from an emergent towards a more planned, mature stage over time [35,83]. However, this process does not happen automatically, and it can be interrupted, stopped, or reversed [83].

Strategies featured in the interviews, such as establishing monitoring mechanisms and finding allies, can also be found in the literature on organisational learning [66,84] and complex systems, where improving information flows and connecting with allies to develop support networks are described as powerful leverage points [21,85].

While findings from the present study suggest that practitioners often took a more action-driven approach at the beginning of their sustainability journey, it is also shown that they engaged in structured and strategic activities early on. This came partly from the use of external, often sector-specific frameworks for managing change, but also from deliberate evaluation of actions, reflection, and adaptation.

In contexts where sustainability is a strategic priority implemented from the top, several studies point out the importance of allowing initiatives to emerge, and then supporting and legitimising them [73]. This is echoed by the interviews, which showed that even after sustainability had become a more formal part of the organisation, practitioners used their influence and resources to keep expanding their support base by encouraging collaboration and participation.

Finally, from the literature, it seems that embedding sustainability into an institution's framework as policy or strategy mostly happens at a more advanced stage [83,86], and sponsorship from senior management is necessary [87]. While this generally holds true, the findings from this study have shown that sustainability can also be integrated into organisational structures and core activities early on. This is done by establishing good working relationships with key stakeholders, using influence and persuasion, and implementing consecutive, subtle, but long-lasting and impactful changes.

6. Conclusions

In the context of a heavily under-researched area, this explorative study represents an initial attempt to highlight how sustainability practitioners in public organisations and CSOs perceive change, and to illustrate the diverse strategies and tactics they use to

implement it. Although each interviewee was exposed to different organisational contexts and had distinct duties and responsibilities, by examining their experiences, perceptions, and actions, three overarching themes could be identified. These themes were distilled into a framework for effective practice, featuring the key areas of knowledge and reflection, support and engagement, and driving and enabling change.

The framework developed from the results of this study echoes concepts and ideas from the organisational change literature, including organisational learning and culture, systems thinking, power politics, reflective practice, and action research. However, the findings also add important nuances as to what extent and in which ways these concepts are implicitly or explicitly applied by practitioners leading change towards sustainability in public bodies and CSOs in the UK.

The insights generated by this article serve as a first reference point and encourage researchers and practitioners to use, adapt, and further develop the framework for effective practice. Furthermore, for each framework area there are a number of areas for future research. For instance, approaches such as reflective practice, action research, or organisational learning might be investigated in the context of public bodies and CSOs to help practitioners develop organisational understanding and explicitly link it to their working practices. Another avenue for future research might be to use a power-politics lens to examine how change towards sustainability impacts established norms and power structures, and to provide further in-depth understanding of different ways to develop and enhance a support base.

Further research could also examine the contexts and actions necessary for accelerating change towards sustainability throughout the different stages of transition, and the effectivity of particularly strategies and tactics that enable impactful and lasting change to organisational structures and culture. Finally, there are also more generic avenues for potential future research, such as investigating how the framework outlined in this study could be applied to practitioners working across a range of public bodies and CSOs, differing in size, sector, and geographical location.

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