

August 2018



# ClientEarth's Climate Snapshot

A survey of UK attitudes towards  
climate change and its impacts



## Foreword

**In mid-2018, wildfires raged in the United States, Greece and within the Arctic Circle in Sweden. Europe sweltered during a record heatwave and in Japan more than 100 people died and thousands were hospitalised amid record temperatures.**

In the face of these increasing extremes, the need for climate action has never been more urgent.

Previous polls demonstrate that the British public has been concerned about climate change for many years. In this poll, we have taken a closer look at public sentiment in relation to the impacts of climate change in the UK, asking people what the government should be doing in response.

The results were striking. In contrast to the ascendancy of climate denial in Trump's America, UK citizens are well informed about the science of climate change and want to see the government stick to its Paris Agreement pledge. The majority are sceptical about whether what the government is currently doing is enough.

More surprising was the sentiment we uncovered towards fossil fuel companies. As climate lawsuits hit the mainstream, this polling makes clear that the British public has strong opinions about fossil fuel companies' contribution to climate change – through their activities and their lobbying against climate policies – and how those companies should be held accountable for it.

Looking to the future, the survey results also contain remarkable findings about how the British public want to produce and consume their energy, with a clear preference for renewables over fossil fuels, and overwhelming interest in community energy schemes. These preferences are reflected in popular opinions about the response from financial institutions to climate change: people in the UK are clearly concerned about pension funds' continued

investment in fossil fuels. These insights into consumer preferences will be of interest to industry as well as policymakers.

It is worth noting that although not planned this way, this survey was undertaken during the recent record-breaking heatwave in the UK – a heatwave that scientists have concluded was made three times more likely because of human activity. Given the nature of the questions, we do not believe the timing of the report lessens any of its findings. If anything, asking the public to consider complex questions about climate change when they are already talking about it – while overheating on the train, during the school run and at work – should give us a clearer idea of what the public wants to be done to tackle it.

The impacts of climate change will only increase in coming years. This latest heatwave is just the beginning. We hope this poll is taken as a timely warning that strong action on climate change is not just supported by the public – it will likely be demanded.

The public want to see leaders from government and business act with ambition, and now – for today's voters and consumers, and most importantly, for our children and the children of tomorrow.

**Alice Garton,**  
Head of Climate  
Programme



Research undertaken  
with assistance from



The Climate Change  
Collaboration



## Introduction

This is the first thorough investigation of UK attitudes towards the deeper issues of climate change.

We asked key questions around who should pay for climate change, how the government should respond, the role of the financial system and how we power our future.

This report presents the findings of a survey of 2,005 UK adults aged 18+ conducted between the 20th and 24th July 2018. The figures are weighted to be representative of all UK adults.

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ClientEarth is a charity that uses the power of the law to protect people and the planet.

We are international lawyers, scientists and policy experts, finding practical solutions for the world's biggest environmental challenges.

We are fighting climate change, protecting oceans and wildlife, supporting sustainable forestry, greening energy, making business more responsible and pushing for government transparency.

We believe the law is a tool for positive change.

From our offices in London, Brussels, Warsaw, New York City, Beijing and Madrid, we work on laws throughout their lifetime, from the earliest stages to implementation.

And when those laws are broken, we go to court to enforce them.

# Key findings

## Climate impacts

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- People in the UK are already witnessing extreme weather events caused by climate change, and there is significant worry about the future of food and water supplies, human health and conflict
- More than three in five feel the government is not doing enough in preparing for and adapting to climate impacts
- Investment in renewable energy and reducing industry emissions are the most popular actions people believe the UK government should be taking to limit climate change

## Climate litigation

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- Almost half believe it would be acceptable for UK citizens to take the government to court if it failed to keep its Paris Agreement pledges
- Seven in ten believe fossil fuel companies should help pay for damage caused by extreme weather events
- More than eight in ten believe that companies who knew about climate change early on and continue to lobby government against taking action should be at least partially responsible for the costs of major weather events
- Fewer than a fifth believe fossil fuel companies can be trusted to change their business model

## Climate finance

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- Over half would expect their pension/investments to avoid fossil fuel projects that contribute to climate change
- Half would expect their pension fund to consider the financial risk to future generations
- Three fifths would be interested in a pension fund or financial institution that considers climate change impacts of the companies it invests in
- Two thirds thought investing in fossil fuel companies is a risky strategy for the long term

## The future of energy

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- Consumers ranked gas second last for energy sources the UK government should favour, with solar and offshore wind leading
- A majority of consumers would like to install both solar panels and a home energy storage device for their homes, if greater assistance was available
- Almost three quarters of consumers would be interested in community energy schemes.
- Over two thirds were in favour of breaking up the Big Six's market share to allow smaller, cleaner, and locally owned energy systems to develop

# Climate impacts:

## Extreme weather and governmental response

From heatwaves to flooding, hurricanes and wildfires, people are already witnessing extreme weather events across the world and increasingly, in the UK.

Extreme weather event attribution is the rapidly advancing science linking the increased chance of extreme weather and anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, and the science is making it increasingly hard for decision-makers to ignore the risks associated with a rapidly warming atmosphere.

Governments must maintain and build on their commitments under the international climate treaty of 2015, the Paris Agreement, and companies should align their business strategies with the treaty's goals.

We asked the British public their opinions on climate change impacts and the actions in response they expect from their elected representatives.



# Insight

## Climate impacts and extreme weather

- In mid-2018, wildfires raged in the United States, Greece and within the Arctic Circle in Sweden. Europe sweltered during a record heatwave and in Japan more than 100 people died and thousands were hospitalised amid record temperatures.
- Climate science studies show that global warming made the record heat in northern Europe between two and fivetimes more likely,<sup>1</sup> and increased the chances of the severe drought recently experienced in South Africa's by a factor of three.<sup>2</sup> Scientists also concluded that 2017's Hurricane Harvey was made up to three times more likely because of human emissions.<sup>3</sup>
- 2017 was the most expensive year in history for natural disasters, costing the global insurance industry \$135 billion in inflation-adjusted losses.<sup>4</sup>
- The UK's Environmental Audit Committee released a report into the UK's resilience to extreme heatwave, concluding that heat-related deaths are likely to increase dramatically unless the Government takes co-ordinated action with local authorities and the NHS.<sup>5</sup>
- 2018 also marked the 30th anniversary of then NASA scientist James Hansen's historic testimony on human-induced global warming to the US Senate, demonstrating that the science of climate change has been well known to lawmakers for decades.
- Despite this, the Trump administration worked to remove climate protections, signalling its intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, cancelling the Obama-era Clean Power Plan and the US EPA's proposed rule on vehicle emissions.

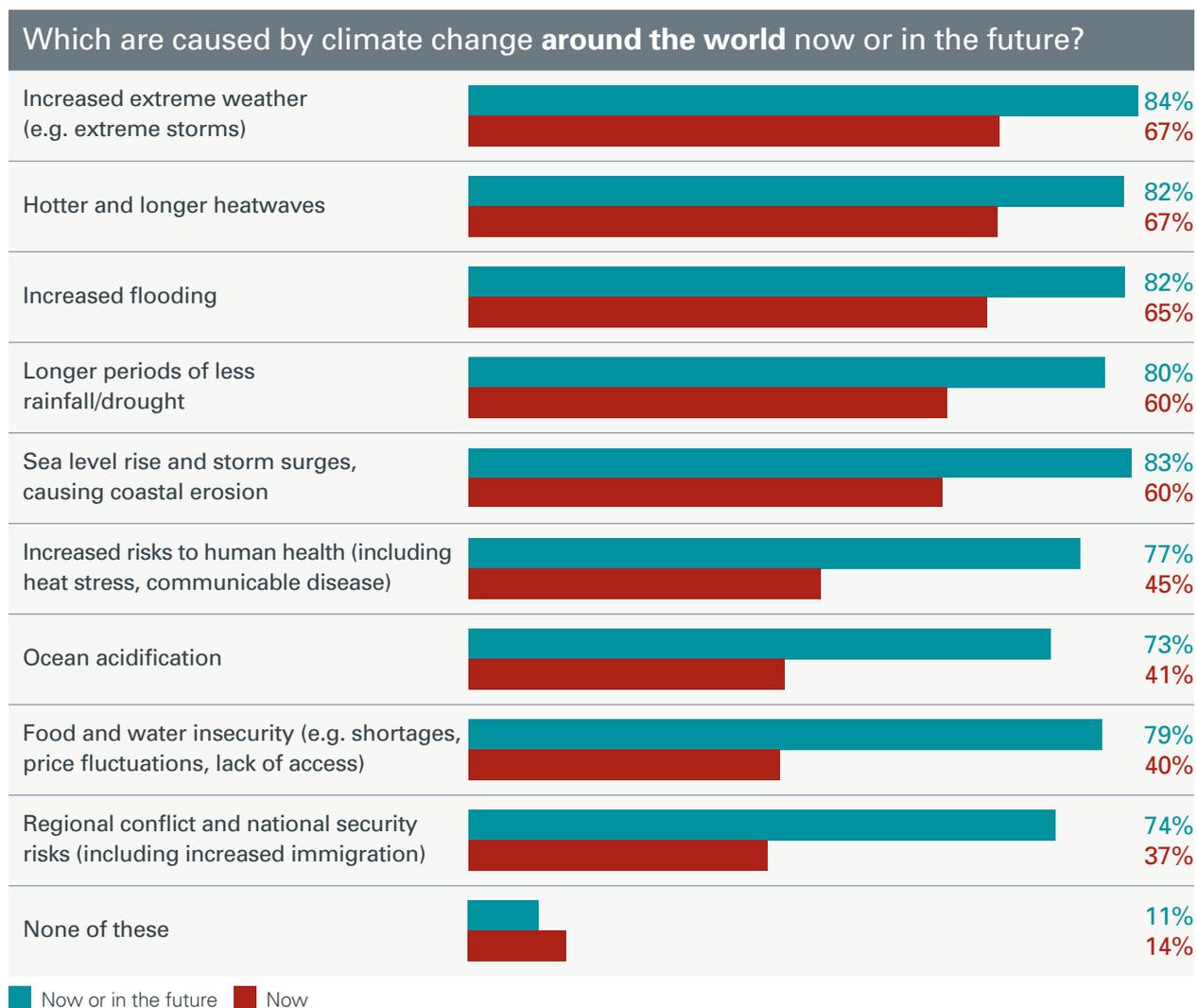
“The British public have made it clear that the government must be doing more to tackle climate change. Despite public support for stronger targets, progress on climate policy in many UK sectors has effectively stalled in recent years. To show real climate leadership, the government must do more – and with greater urgency than ever – if we are to achieve our legally-binding targets at the lowest cost.”

**Jonathan Church**, Climate and Energy Lawyer





Globally, weather changes are the most common effects of climate change noticed by people, and there is significant worry about the future of food and water supplies



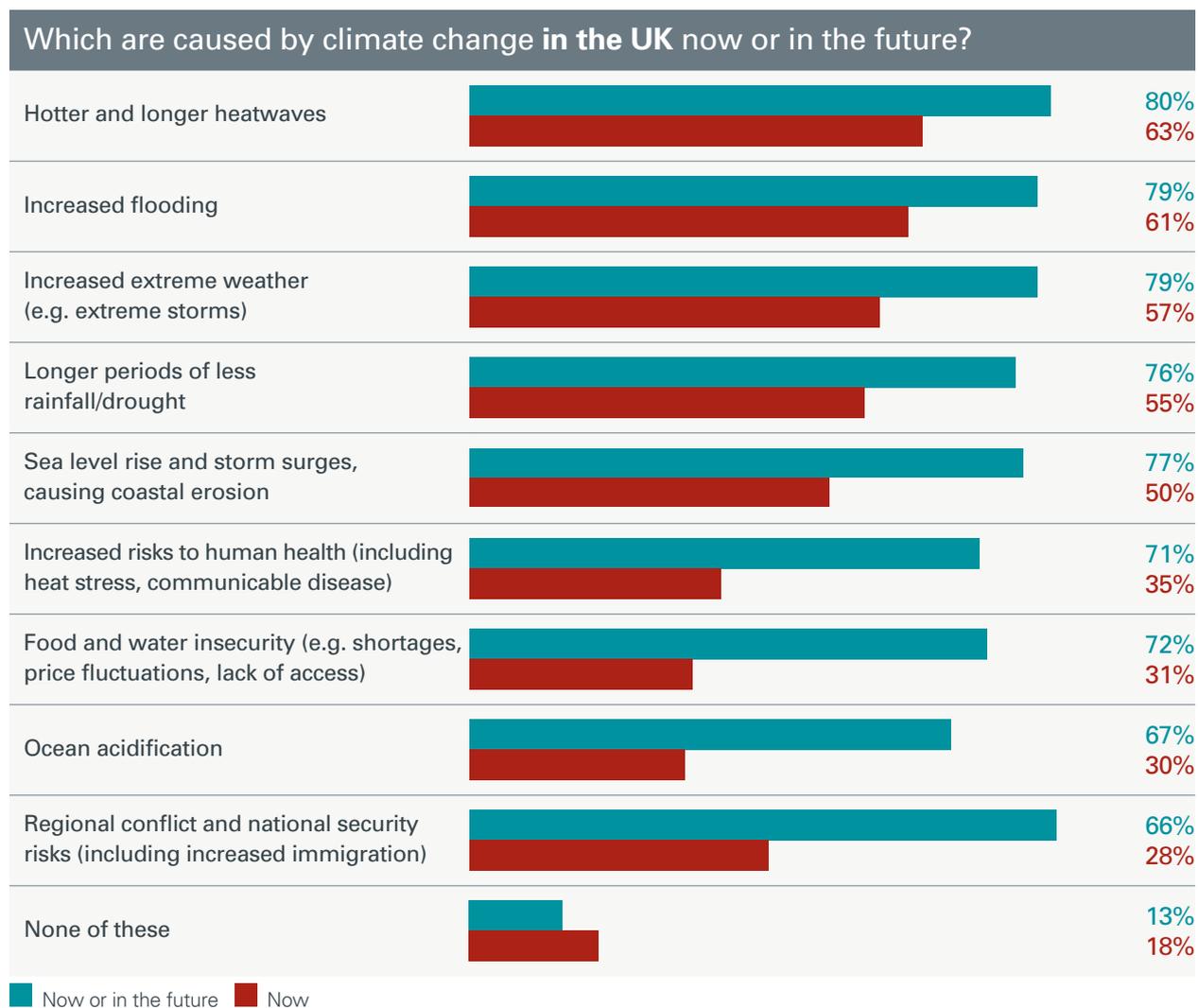
q1a\_1\_new. Which, if any, of the following do you feel are being caused by climate change around the world now or will be in the future...? Please select all that apply. Base: all (n=2,005)

**18-24 year olds are more likely to believe that the majority of the climate change effects are happening in the world now or will in the future, but are significantly more likely to have said:**

- Sea level rise and storm surges, causing coastal erosions (**90%**)
- Longer periods of less rainfall/drought (**86%**)
- Increased risks to human health (**84%**)
- Regional conflict and national security risks (**81%**)
- Ocean acidification (**81%**)



Weather changes are the most common effects of climate change people expect to affect the UK, and there is significant worry about the future of food and water supplies, human health and conflict



q2a\_1\_new. Which, if any, of the following do you feel are affecting the UK now and will do in the future because of climate change? Please select all that apply. Base: all (n=2,005)

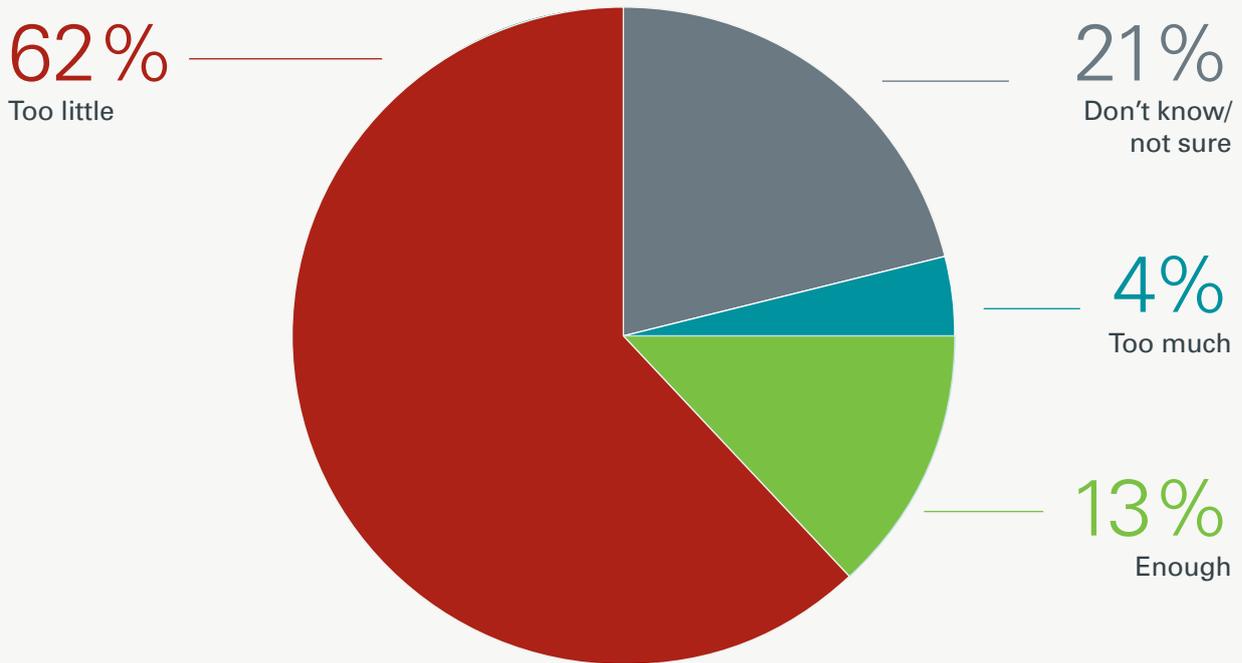
**18-24 year olds are more likely to believe that the majority of the climate change effects are happening in the UK now or will in the future, but are significantly more likely to have said:**

- Hotter and longer heat waves (**88%**)
- Increased flooding (**86%**)
- Increased extreme weather (**85%**)
- Sea level rise and storm surges, causing coastal erosion (**85%**)
- Increased risks of human health (**81%**)

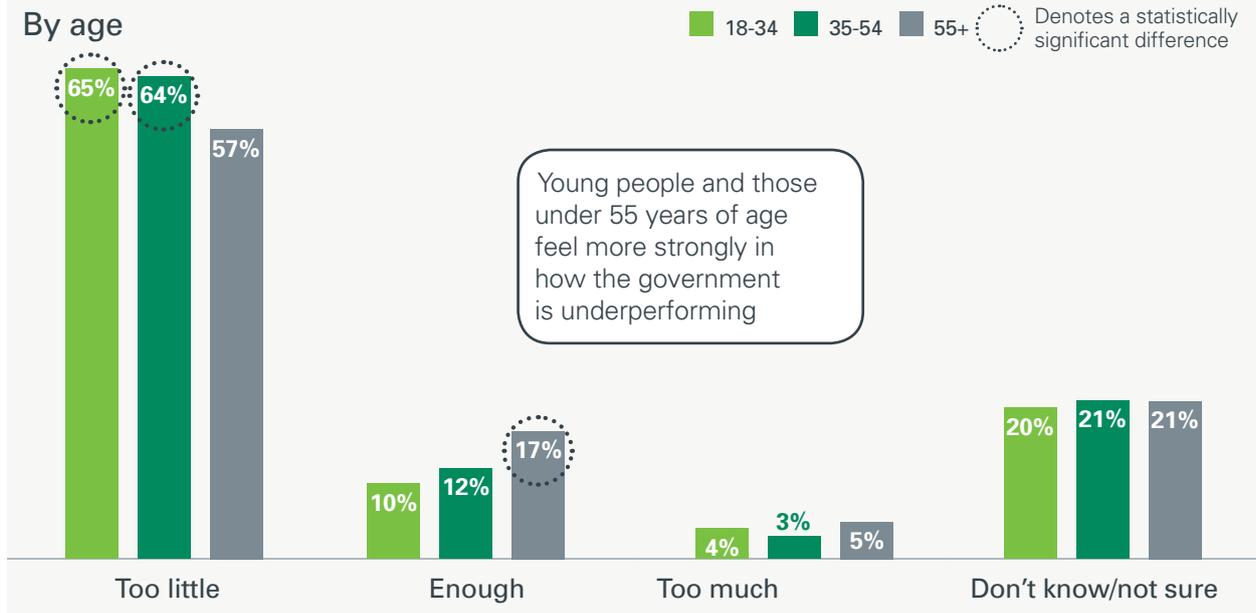


## More than three in five feel that the government is not doing enough in preparing for and adapting to the impacts of climate change

When preparing for and adapting to the impacts of climate change, the UK government is doing...



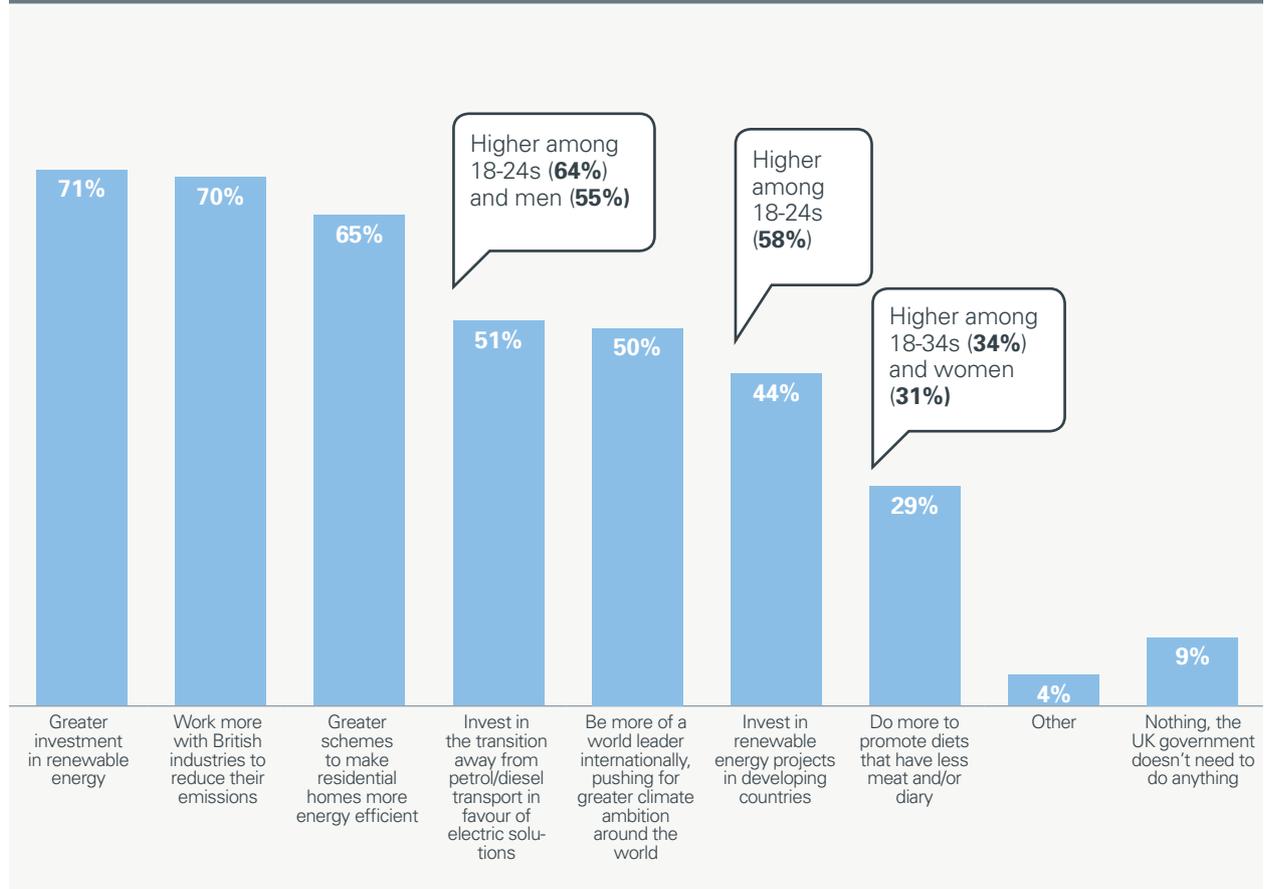
### By age



q3a. Thinking now about how the UK government is preparing for and adapting to the impacts of climate change, do you think the government is doing...? Base: all (n=2,005)

## Investment in renewable energy and reducing industry emissions are the most popular actions people believe the UK government should be taking to limit climate change

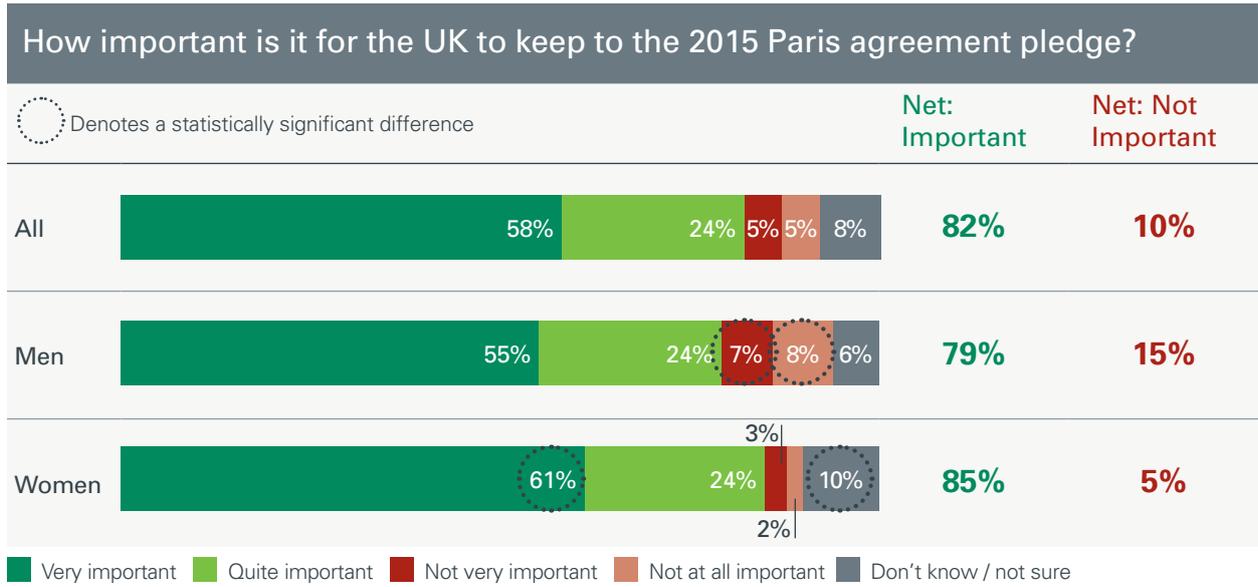
### Actions the UK government should be taking to limit climate change



q4a. What actions, if any, should the UK government be taking to limit climate change? Please select all that apply. Base: all (n=2,005)



# More than eight in ten think it is important for the UK to keep its 2015 Paris Agreement pledge



q6. The global community signed up to the Paris Agreement in 2015 – a declaration to limit the amount of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere. When countries signed, they made individual pledges to reduce their emissions as quickly as they could and to aim at having net zero emissions as soon as possible in line with each country's respective capabilities. How important or not do you think it is for the UK to keep this pledge? Base: all (n=2,005)

# Climate litigation:

## Who should pay for the cost of climate change?

The science is settled: climate change is real and it is man-made. People around the world are now asking more difficult questions, such as who is to blame and how much should they pay for preparing for and adapting to climate change? Citizens are increasingly turning to the courts to hold both states and companies to account for their inaction in the face of climate crisis.

A study shows that almost two-thirds of all greenhouse gas emissions since the dawn of the industrial age can be attributed to the production of fossil fuels by just 90 companies.<sup>6</sup> In 2017-18, many of these companies were taken to court by US states and cities claiming that these companies must help pay for adapting infrastructure to sea level rise and more extreme weather.

Many of these fossil fuel companies have known about the dangers of climate change for decades and continue to actively lobby governments against any reduction in the use of coal, oil and gas.



# Insight

## Climate litigation

- Climate change litigation is on the rise, with increasing numbers of cases being brought against both states and companies around the world.<sup>7</sup> More than 15 separate cases have been brought in the US against fossil fuel producing companies in the past 12 months. Meanwhile a case brought by 21 children against the US government's failure to curb greenhouse gas emissions is due to start within weeks, after two failed attempts from the Trump administration to have it thrown out.<sup>8</sup>
- This year hearings also began in the Philippines Commission on Human Rights national inquiry into the role of 47 fossil fuel companies for their role in exacerbating the effects of climate change.<sup>9</sup>
- In May 2018, the Dutch government sought to overturn a landmark climate ruling that ordered the country cut its carbon emissions by at least a quarter by 2020. A verdict is expected this October.<sup>10</sup>
- In late 2018, the case of a Peruvian farmer against the German utility RWE is likely to proceed to trial in a German court.<sup>11</sup>
- 2018 also saw record numbers of institutional investors engaging with large companies on climate change, with some even supporting a resolution at Royal Dutch Shell asking it to set targets to bring its business model in line with the temperature goals of the Paris Agreement.<sup>12</sup>

“The growing list of climate lawsuits filed across the world proves that the impunity that the fossil fuel industry once enjoyed cannot be taken for granted. From the United States to Germany, the Netherlands to the Philippines, the carbon majors can no longer ignore the growing call from the public for those most responsible to address the damage already wrought on communities across the world.”

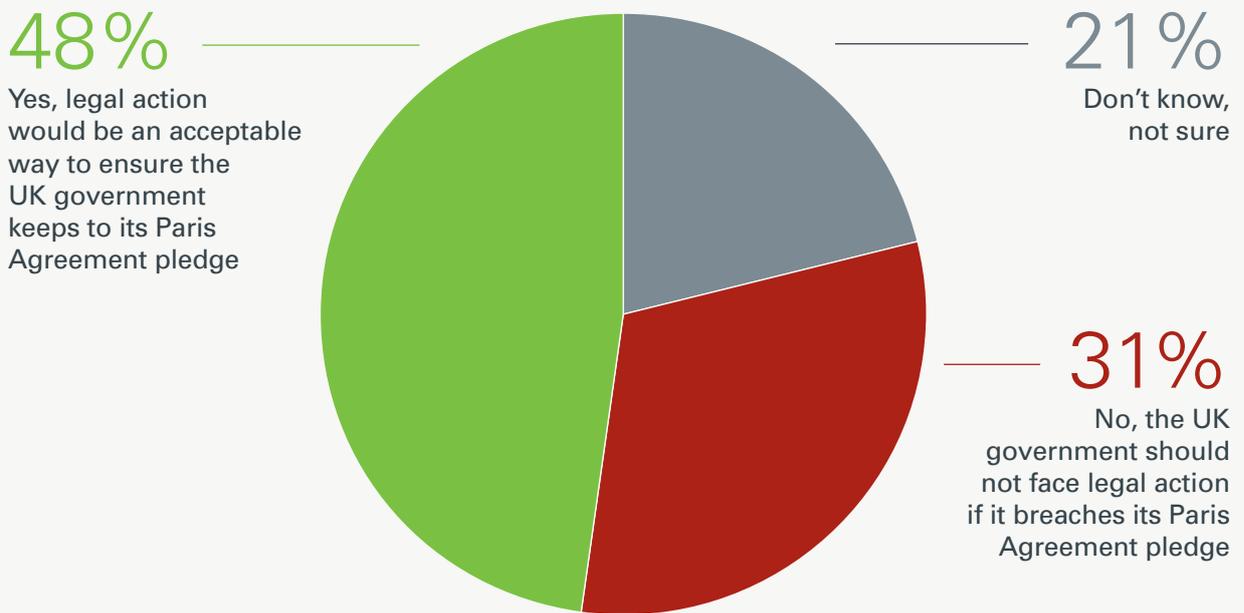
**Sophie Marjanac**, Climate Lawyer





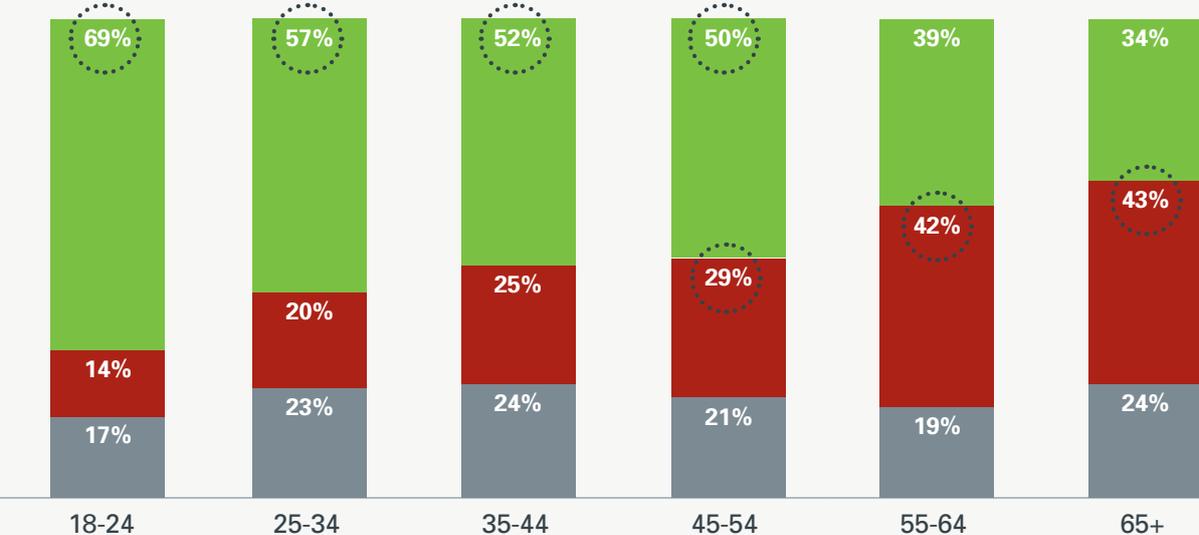
## Almost half believe it would be acceptable for UK citizens to take the government to court if it failed to keep its Paris Agreement pledges, rising to 69% of 18-24s

Is it acceptable for UK citizens to take the government to court to ensure it keeps its Paris Agreement pledges?



### By age

Denotes a statistically significant difference



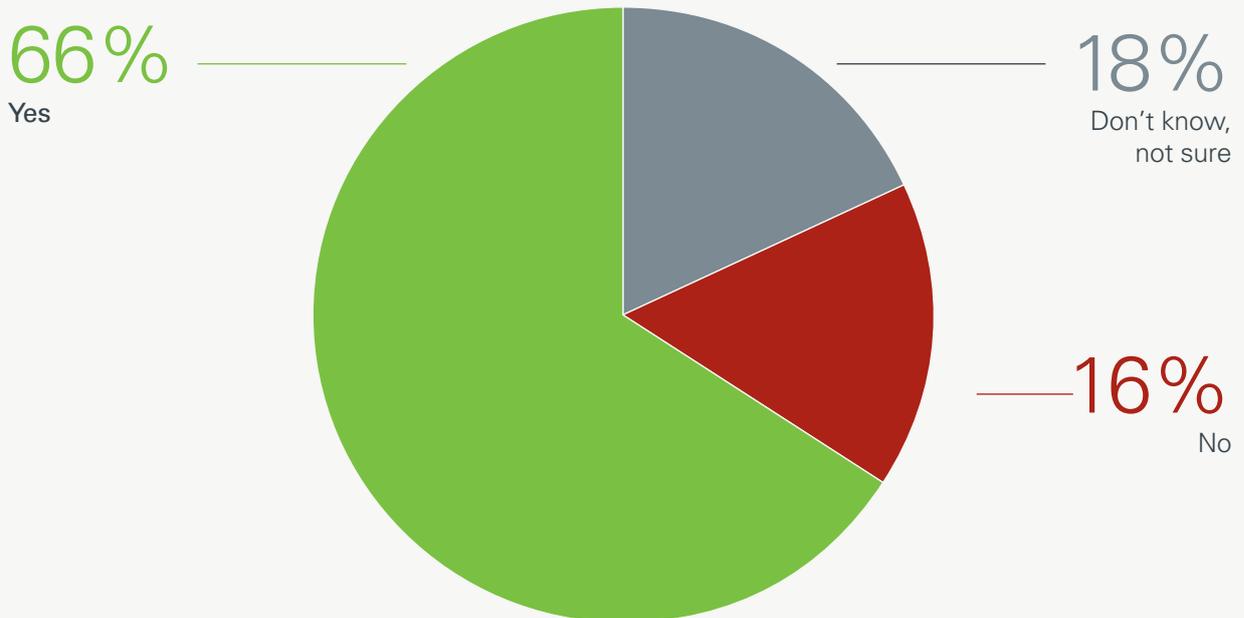
■ Yes, legal action would be an acceptable way to ensure the UK government keeps to its Paris Agreement pledge  
■ No, the UK government should not face legal action if it breaches its Paris Agreement pledge ■ Don't know / not sure

q7. If it looks like the UK is breaking its Paris Agreement pledges to reduce its emissions as quickly as possible, is it acceptable for UK citizens to take the government to court to ensure its promise to the rest of the world is kept? Base: all (n=2,005)



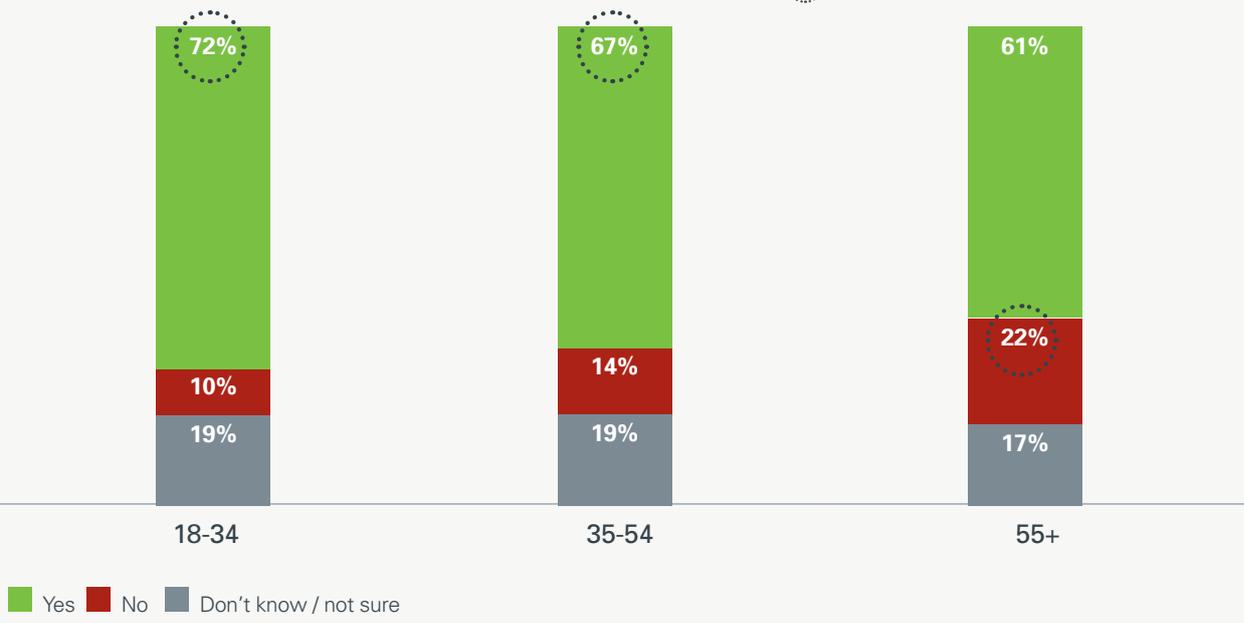
## Two thirds believe people should be able to challenge in court policy decisions that impact people in areas vulnerable to climate change

Should people be able to use the courts to challenge government decisions that affect people living in areas vulnerable to climate change?



By age

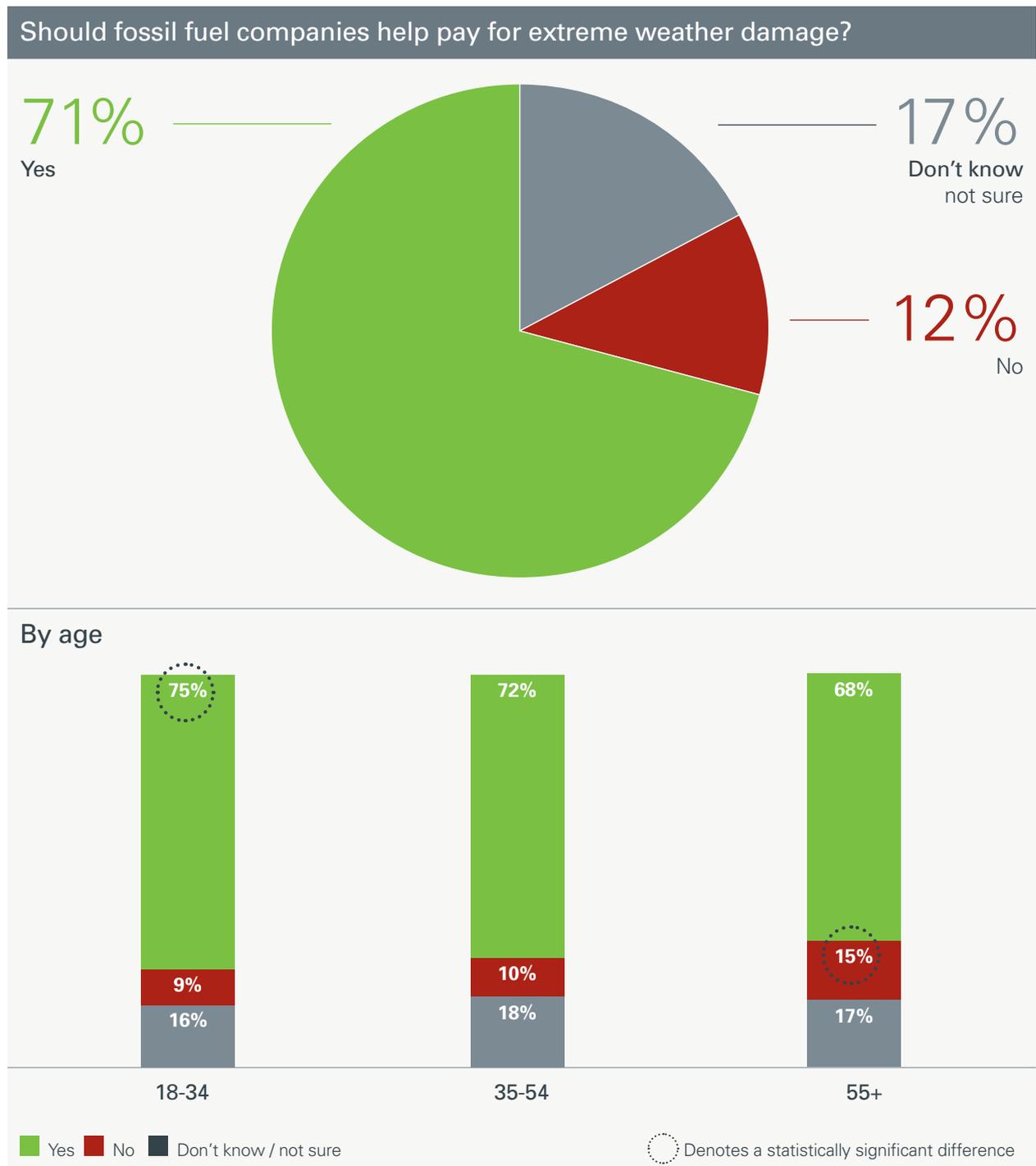
○ Denotes a statistically significant difference



q8a. After major floods in Britain in 2015, there was public concern that homes may be threatened by weakened flood defences, due to the UK government's budget cuts. Sometimes political decisions can be made that are likely to have an impact on people living in areas vulnerable to climate change. Do you think it is right that people can use the courts to challenge such decisions?  
Base: all (n=2,005)



## Seven in ten believe fossil fuel companies should help pay for damage caused by extreme weather events



q8b. Do you think fossil fuel companies, whose products contribute directly to climate change, should help pay for the tens of billions in damages from extreme weather events? Base: all (n=2,005)

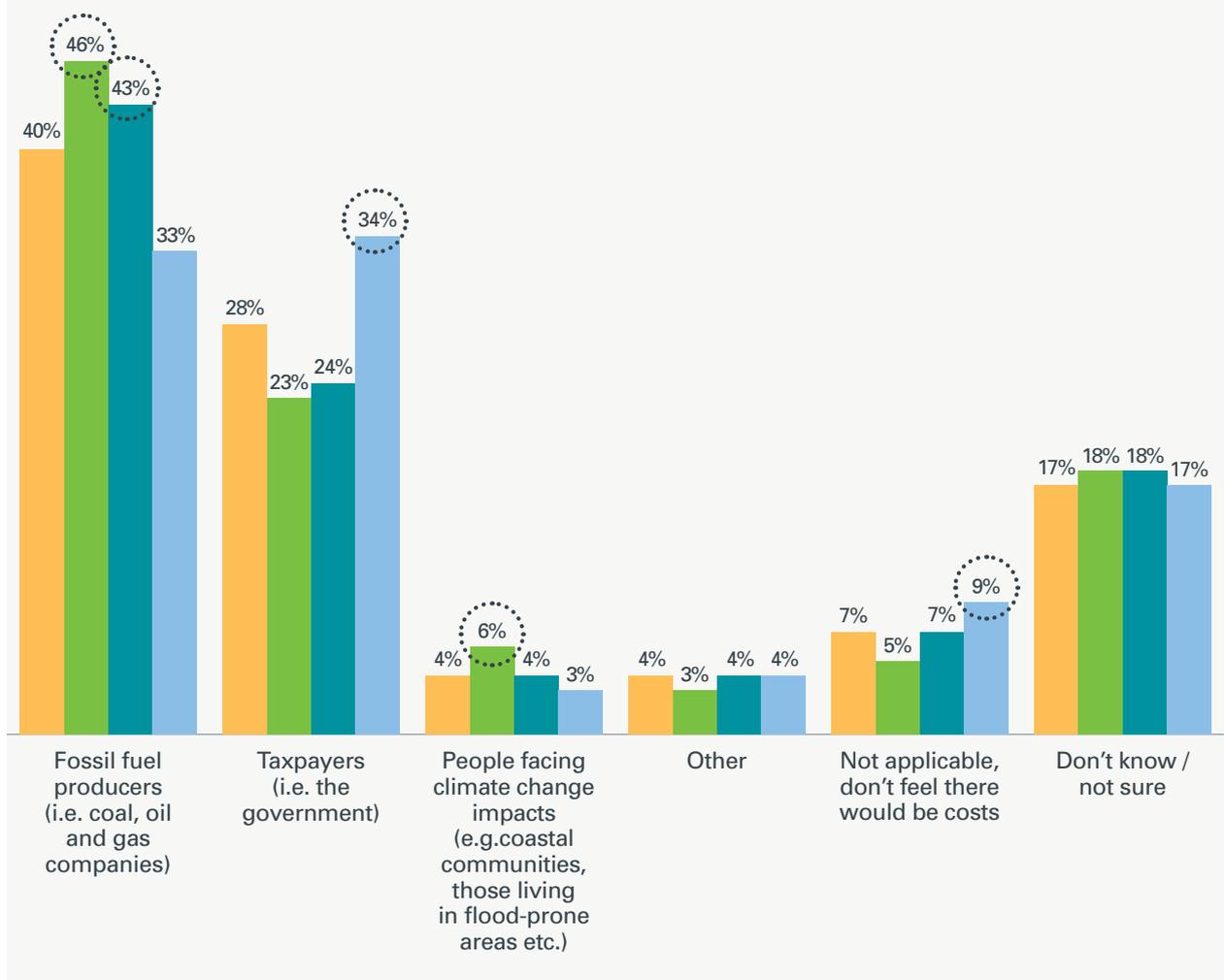


## Fossil fuel companies come out top overall as the group most obliged to pay for the costs of climate change preparation, with strongest feelings among those aged under 55

### Who has the most obligation to pay the costs for climate change preparation?

#### By age

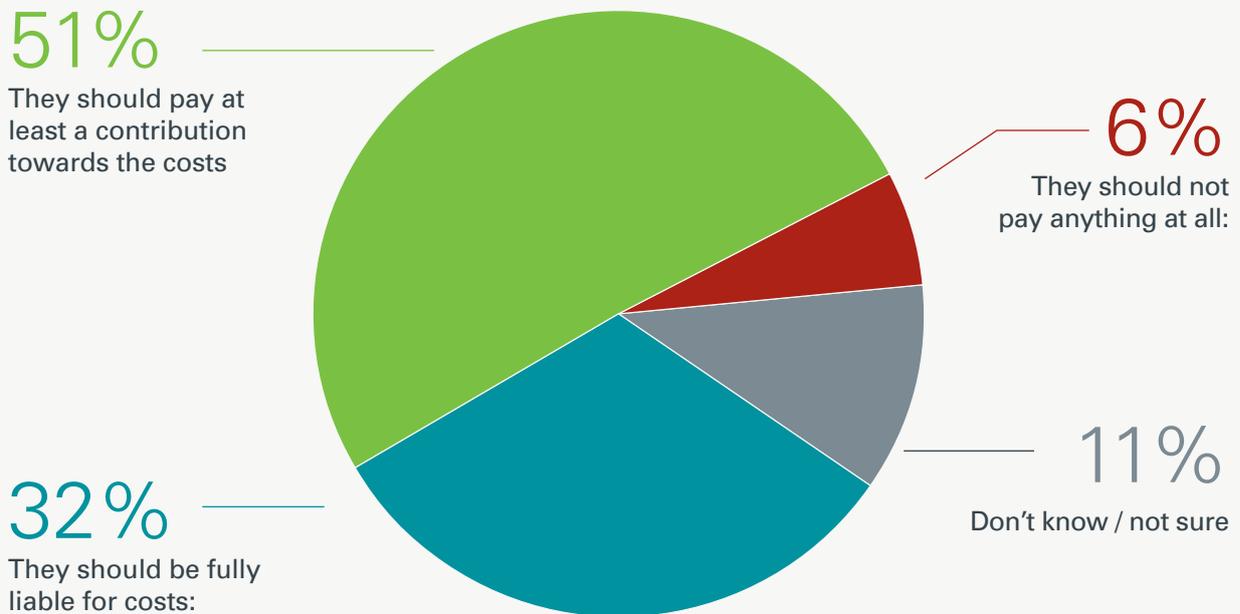
■ All 
 ■ 18-34 
 ■ 35-54 
 ■ 55+ 
 ○ Denotes a statistically significant difference



q5a. Who has the most obligation to pay the costs of preparation for climate change? Please tick only one.  
Base: all (n=2,005)

More than eight in ten believe that companies that knew about climate change early on and continue to lobby government against taking action should be at least partially responsible for the costs of major weather events

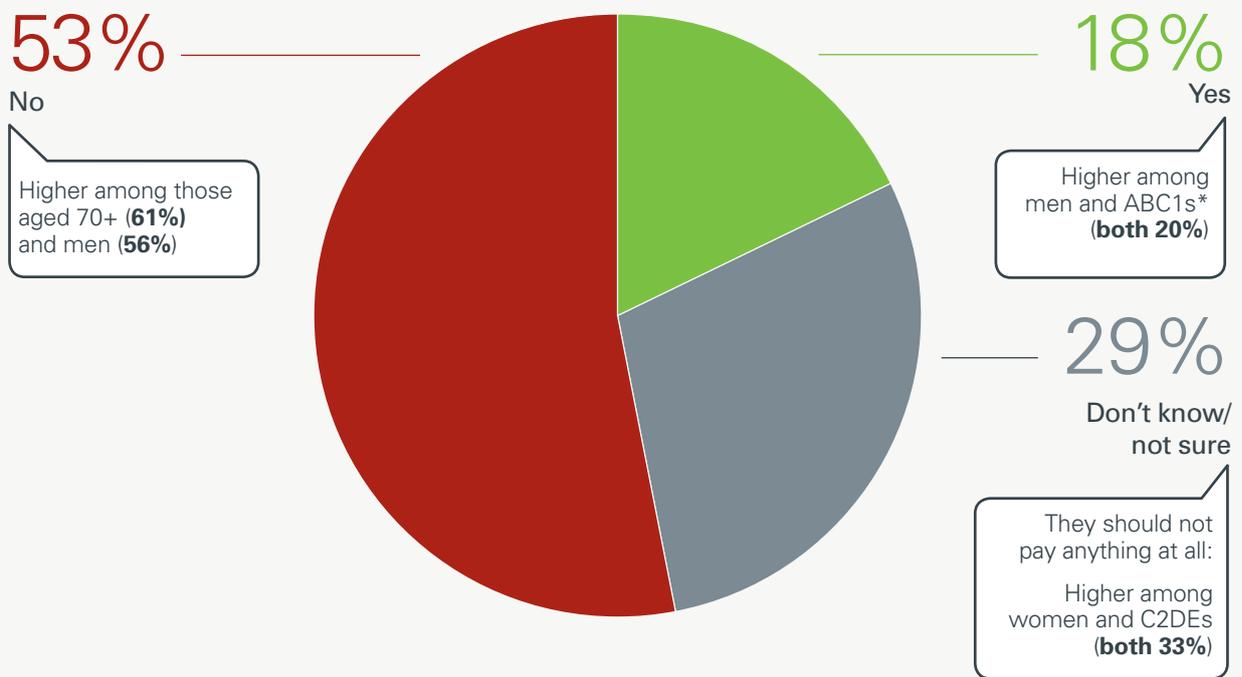
Should companies that knew about climate change damage and lobby against it pay for major weather event costs?



q9a. Investigations show that oil companies such as Shell, Exxon and BP knew in the 1980s about climate change and the damage it would cause. However, in the following decades, such companies funded efforts to sow doubt about climate science and continue to lobby governments against taking action to prevent climate change today. To what extent, if at all, should companies like these be made to pay for costs caused by major weather events? Base: all (n=2,005)

## Fewer than a fifth believe fossil fuel companies can be trusted to change their business model, even faced with shareholder concern about climate change

Can fossil fuel companies be trusted to change their business model faced with stakeholder concern about climate change?



q10. Faced with shareholder concern about climate change, some major fossil fuel companies say they will change their business model, to eventually move away from oil, gas and coal. Do you think these companies can be trusted to change in that way?  
Base: all (n=2,005)

\*The ABC1 category traditionally refers to someone from the 'middle class' – e.g. works in an office or has a professional qualification or is a senior or middle manager.

# Climate finance:

## Considering the impacts of fossil fuel investments

While it is clear that there is public appetite for urgent climate action, the financial world has proven itself to be slow to catch up. Efforts to reduce emissions and transition to a cleaner energy system are being undermined by continued investment in the sources most responsible for the dramatic changes in global temperatures.

The Paris Agreement recognised that alongside government initiatives, the weight of private finance was essential in changing the current trajectory to keep global temperature rise to well below 2°C – and pursuing efforts to keep it at 1.5°C. But change is not happening fast enough.

As investors, markets and regulators become more aware of climate risk, we asked consumers what they thought about their financial products being exposed to fossil fuels and their expectations of those they've entrusted to manage their investments.



# Insight

## Climate finance

- In May, the UK's Environmental Audit Committee published responses from the UK's 25 largest pension funds detailing the funds' approach to climate risk, with a minority of funds "worryingly complacent".<sup>13</sup>
- The following month the Committee recommended that the government should force companies and pension funds to disclose their exposure to climate risks.<sup>14</sup>
- In July, a pension fund member in Australia took his pension managers to court over the fund's failure to disclose its exposure to climate risk and preventative actions.<sup>15</sup>
- At the start of 2018, New York City announced its intention to divest its \$189 billion pension fund from fossil fuel companies. In July, Ireland became the first country to divest its national investment fund.<sup>16</sup>
- The same month, the Church of England announced it would divest from companies that are not aligned with the Paris agreement.<sup>17</sup>

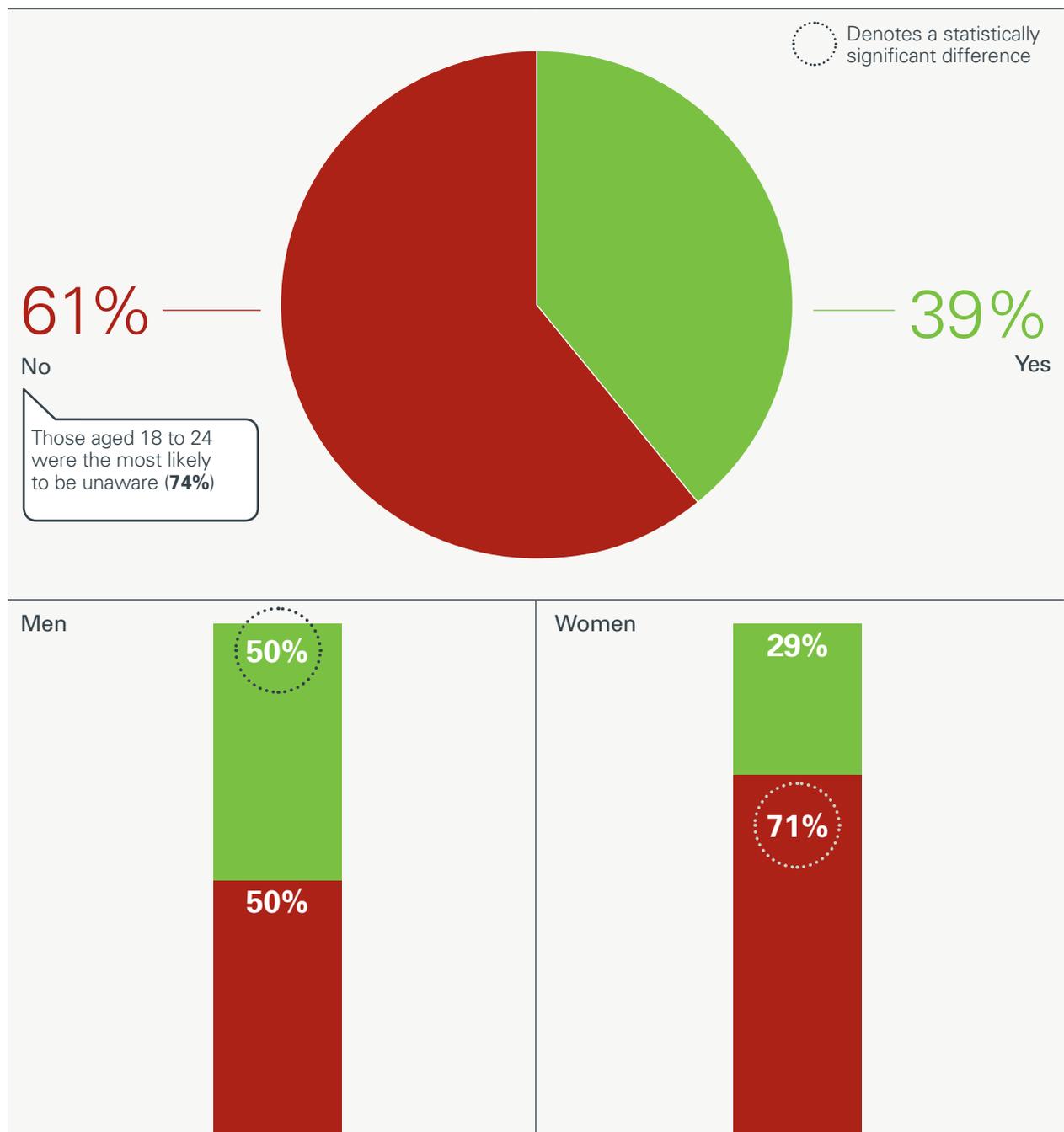
“For too long fossil fuel investment has been built into our financial products by default and it has been almost impossible for customers to extract their bank or pension savings from investments that are exacerbating climate change. But with an increasing awareness of climate risk, we are now starting to witness a wave of public demand for financial products that can help to create a more sustainable and prosperous economy for future generations to inherit and retire in.”

**Danielle Lawson**, Climate Lawyer





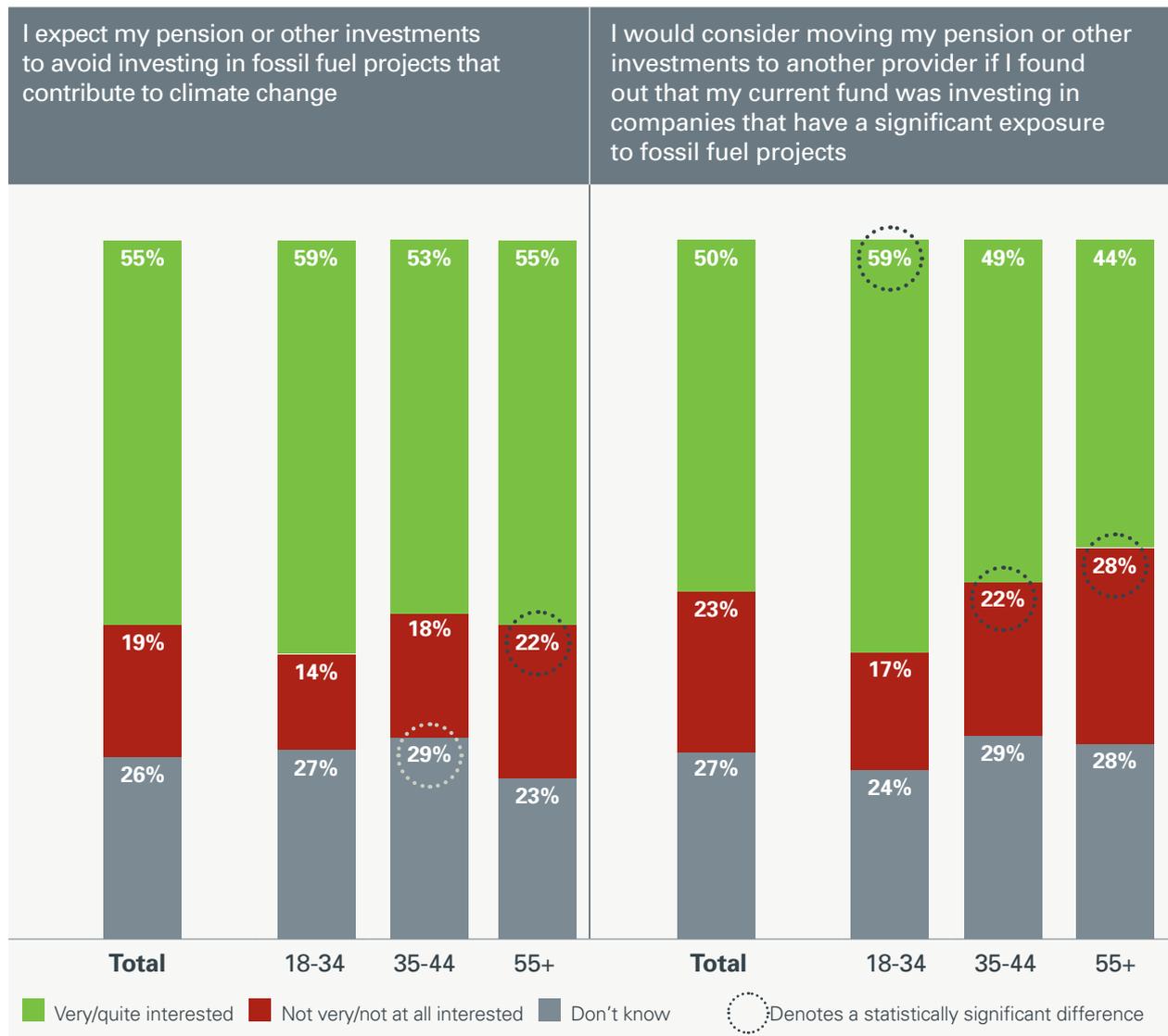
## Only two fifths were aware that UK financial institutions may use customer investments to pay for fossil fuel projects



q12. Did you know that UK financial institutions like banks and pension funds use ordinary customers' investments to help pay for fossil fuel projects – like coal mines, oil wells and gas fields – to be built and operated? Base: All respondents (2,005)



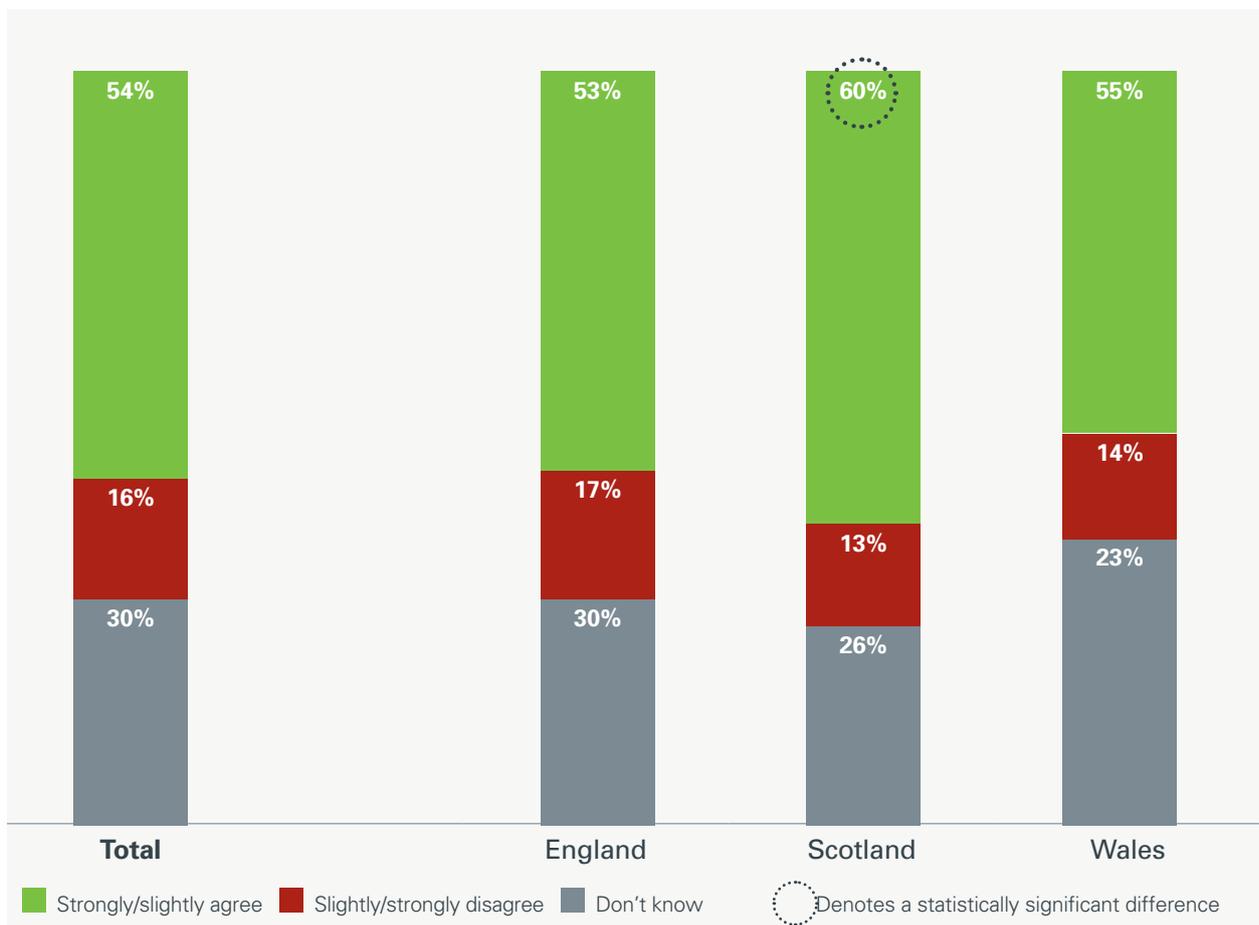
Over half would expect their pension or investments to avoid fossil fuel projects that contribute to climate change – a significant number across all age groups would move funds, and especially 18-34 year olds



q13. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?  
 Base: All respondents (2,005)



When told about the Bank of England's warning that climate change will threaten the "long term prosperity" of the UK's economic system, half would expect their pension fund to consider the financial risk to future generations – rising to three fifths of Scottish adults

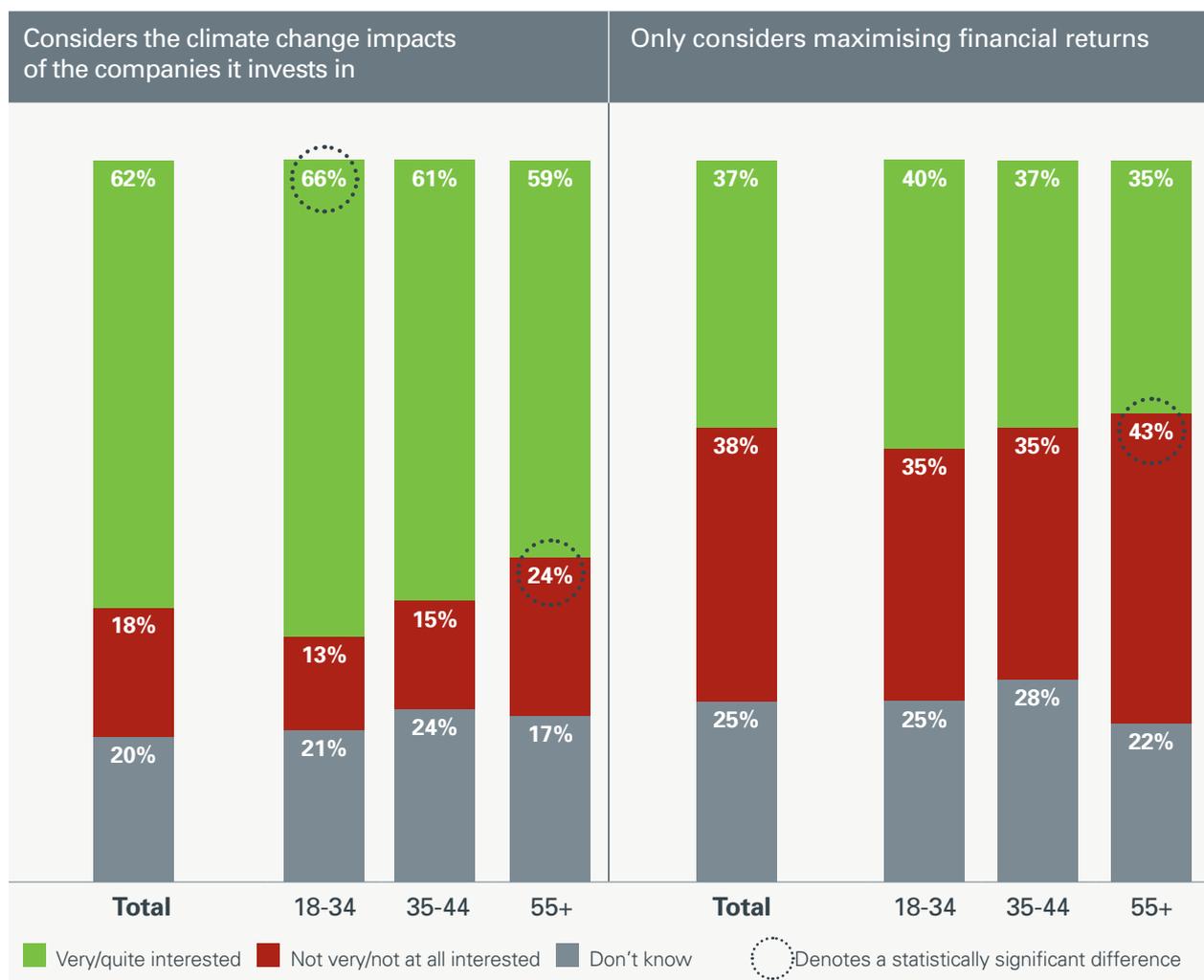


Q14. The Bank of England has warned that climate change will threaten the "long-term prosperity" of our economic system. Yet pension funds often state it is their duty to maximise immediate wealth of their retiring members ahead of considering the effects of climate change. Given this, to what extent do you agree or disagree that you would expect your pension fund to consider the financial risk to future generations of pensioners, not just maximise immediate wealth for existing pensioners? If you don't currently have a pension or had one in the past please think about how you might feel in the future or would have felt.

Base: All respondents (2,005)



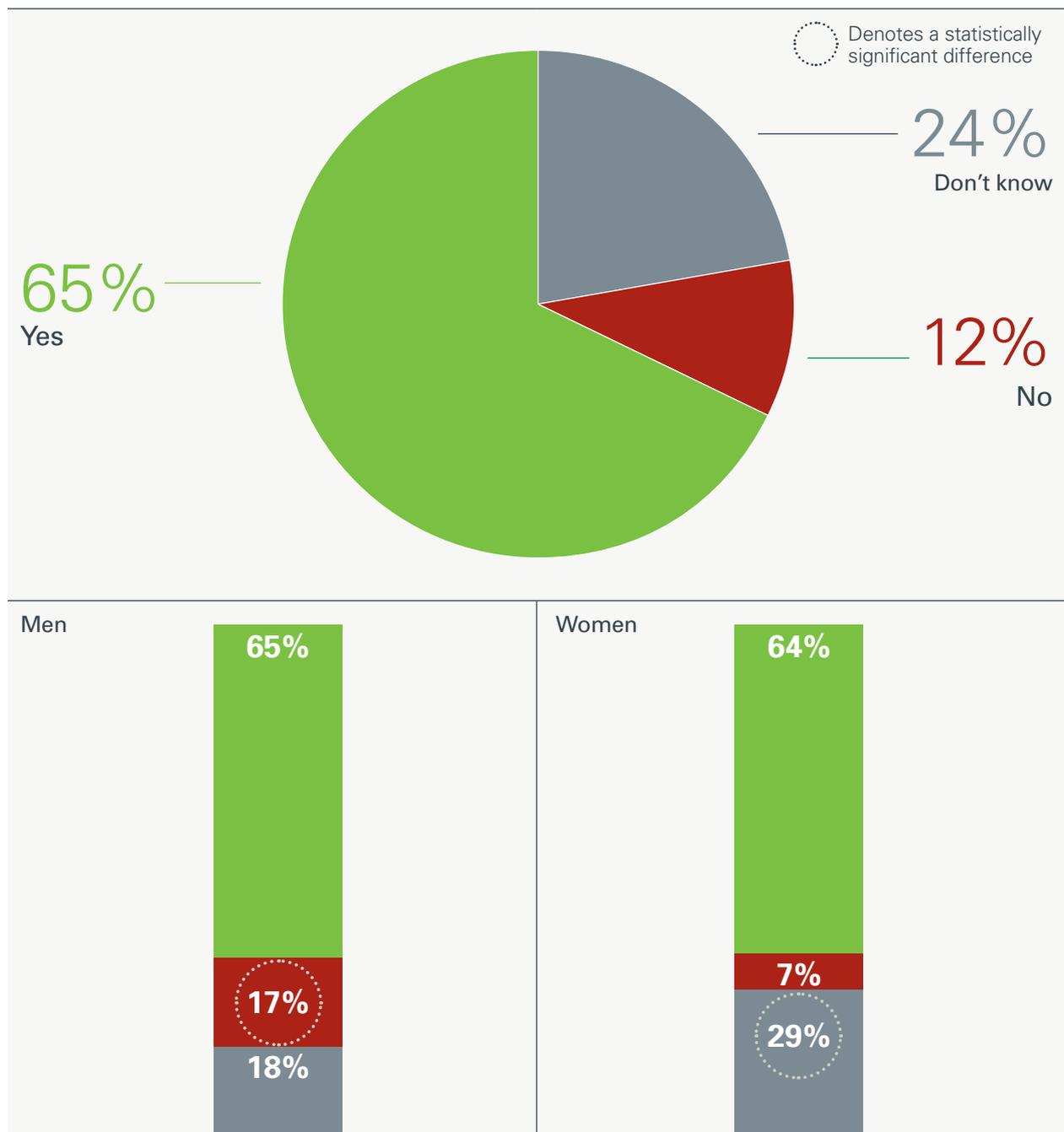
Three fifths would be interested in a pension fund or financial institution that considers climate change impacts of the companies it invests in. In every age group people would prefer a fund that considers climate impacts to one solely focused on maximising financial returns



q15. How interested would you be in a pension fund or other financial institution that...?  
Base: All respondents (2,005)



When told that some scientists say 80% of the world's current fossil fuel reserves need to stay in the ground, two thirds thought investing in fossil fuel companies is a risky strategy for the long term



q16. For the world to avoid catastrophic climate change, scientists say 80% of the world's current fossil fuel reserves – oil, gas and coal – need to stay in the ground. If major fossil fuel companies are relying on burning these reserves to stay profitable, do you think investing in fossil fuel companies is a risky strategy long-term?

Base: All respondents (2,005)

# The future of energy:

## The drive for cleaner, smaller and locally owned power

Since the dawn of the industrial revolution, the UK has been powered by carbon-intensive coal, and more recently gas. But with the economic case supporting fossil fuels collapsing and wider acceptance of their environmental impacts, the UK is entering a new age of cleaner, decentralised electricity generation.

The cost of renewables is dropping fast and breakthroughs continue to be made in how to store energy for when we need it. These developments, paired with smart ways of managing demand to better match supply, mean that – with the right policies and investment – the UK's power sector is ready for radical transformation.

Major energy utilities currently dominate the market. But what do their consumers say? Technology will soon allow the British public to generate their own power and share in its profits when this status quo comes to an end.



# Insight

## The future of energy

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- In May, MPs from the UK Environmental Audit Committee warned of a 'dramatic and worrying collapse' of low-carbon energy investment, leaving investment at its lowest level since 2008, in a trend that threatens the country's ability to meet its carbon budgets.<sup>18</sup>
- A month later, it was revealed that the amount of energy generated by grassroots community schemes in the UK had almost flatlined, due to cuts to subsidies and a hostile planning approach to renewables.<sup>19</sup>
- In July, government advisers told ministers to build just one more nuclear power station after Hinkley Point C, rather than initial plans for as many as six, because renewables could prove a safer investment.<sup>20</sup>
- By August, the number of hours that Britain has been powered without coal in 2018 sits at 1360, which is more than double that in all of 2017.<sup>21</sup>

“Our generation is witnessing an energy transformation unseen since the industrial revolution. We are moving from being locked into large-scale fossil fuel plants, powered by coal and gas, to smaller, cleaner and locally owned energy systems. But we need the right policy and regulatory support. We need to end fossil fuel subsidies and allow renewable energy and storage technologies to flourish.”

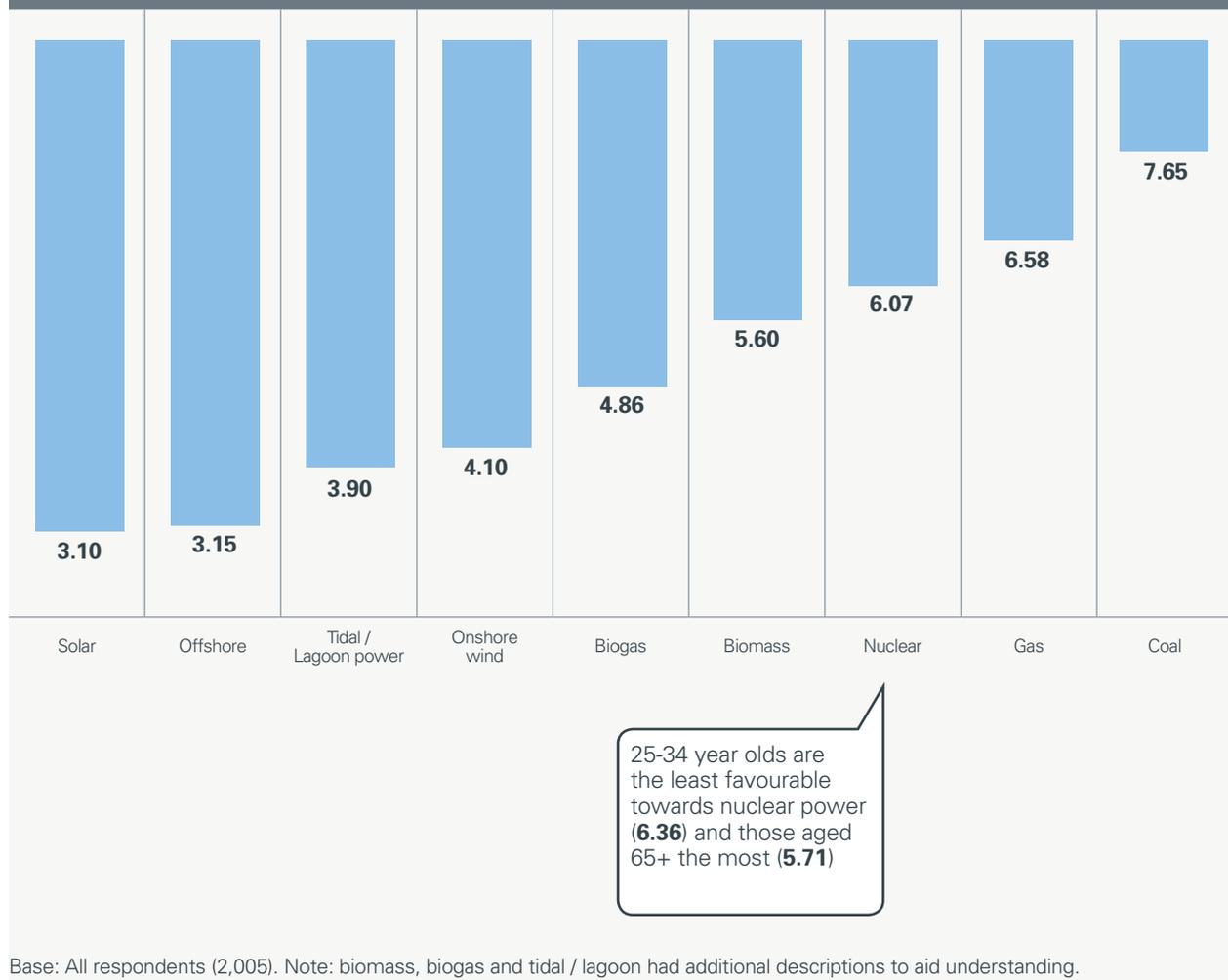
**Sam Bright**, Energy Lawyer





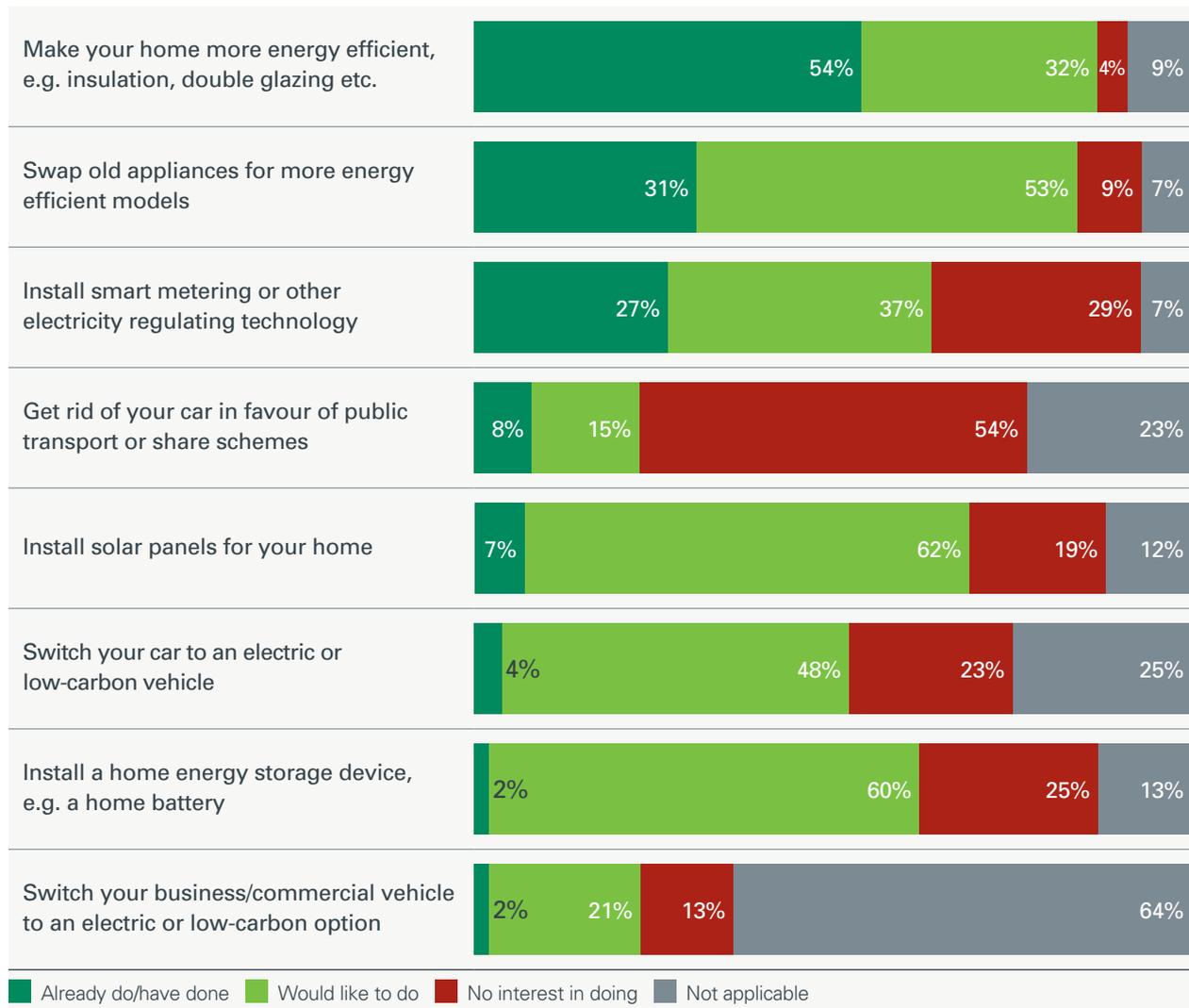
## Consumers ranked gas second last for energy sources the UK government should favour, with solar and offshore wind leading

Q19. What energy sources should the UK government be favouring in its energy mix? Please place them in rank order from 1 being most favourable to 9 least favourable (Mean rank scores shown – higher scores denote less favour)





## A majority of consumers would like to install both solar panels and a home energy storage device for their homes, if greater assistance was available

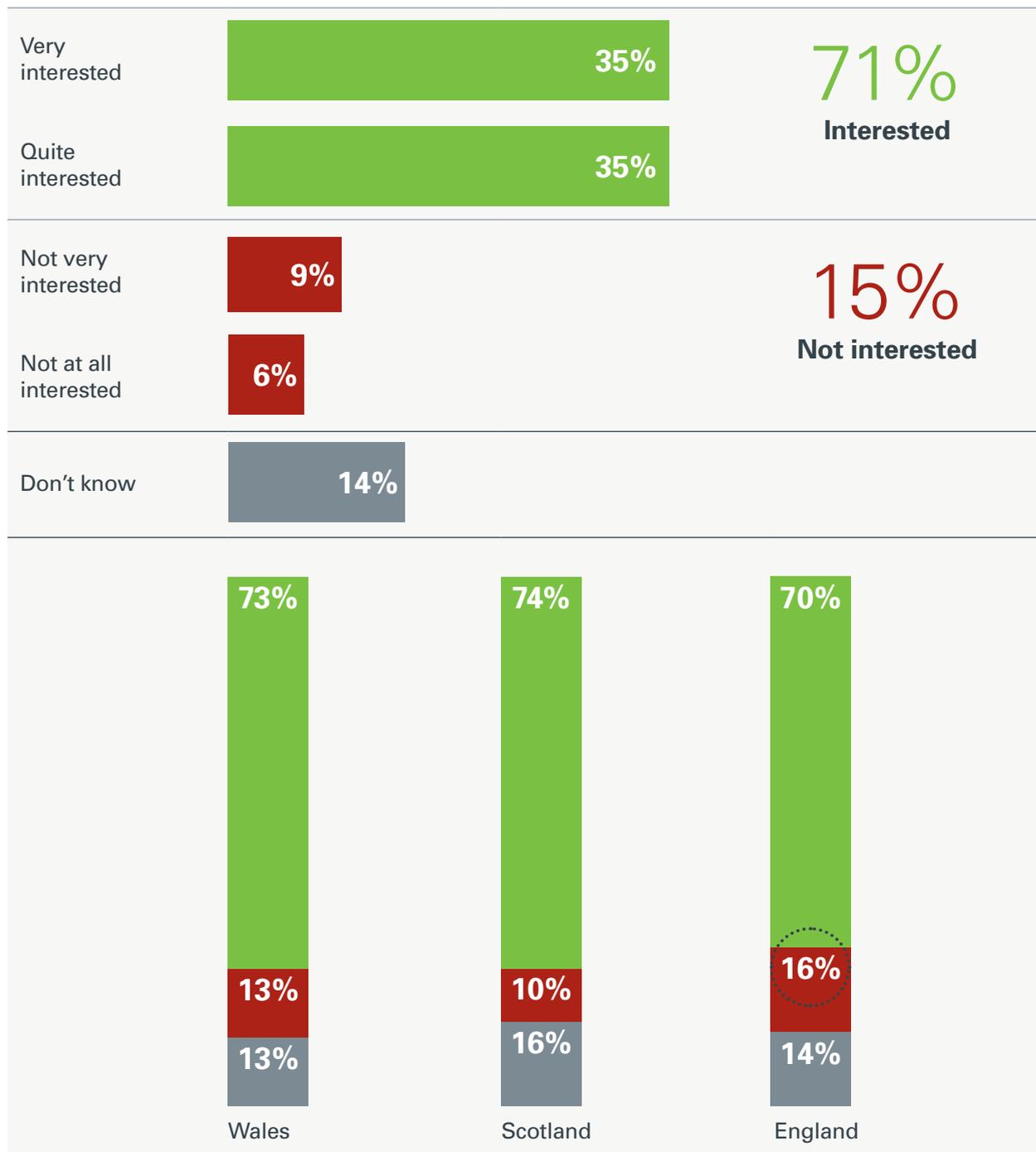


Q22. Are there any actions you would like to take personally or as a household, in response to climate change concerns, if there was greater assistance from the UK government or through community or commercial schemes?

Base: All respondents (2,005)

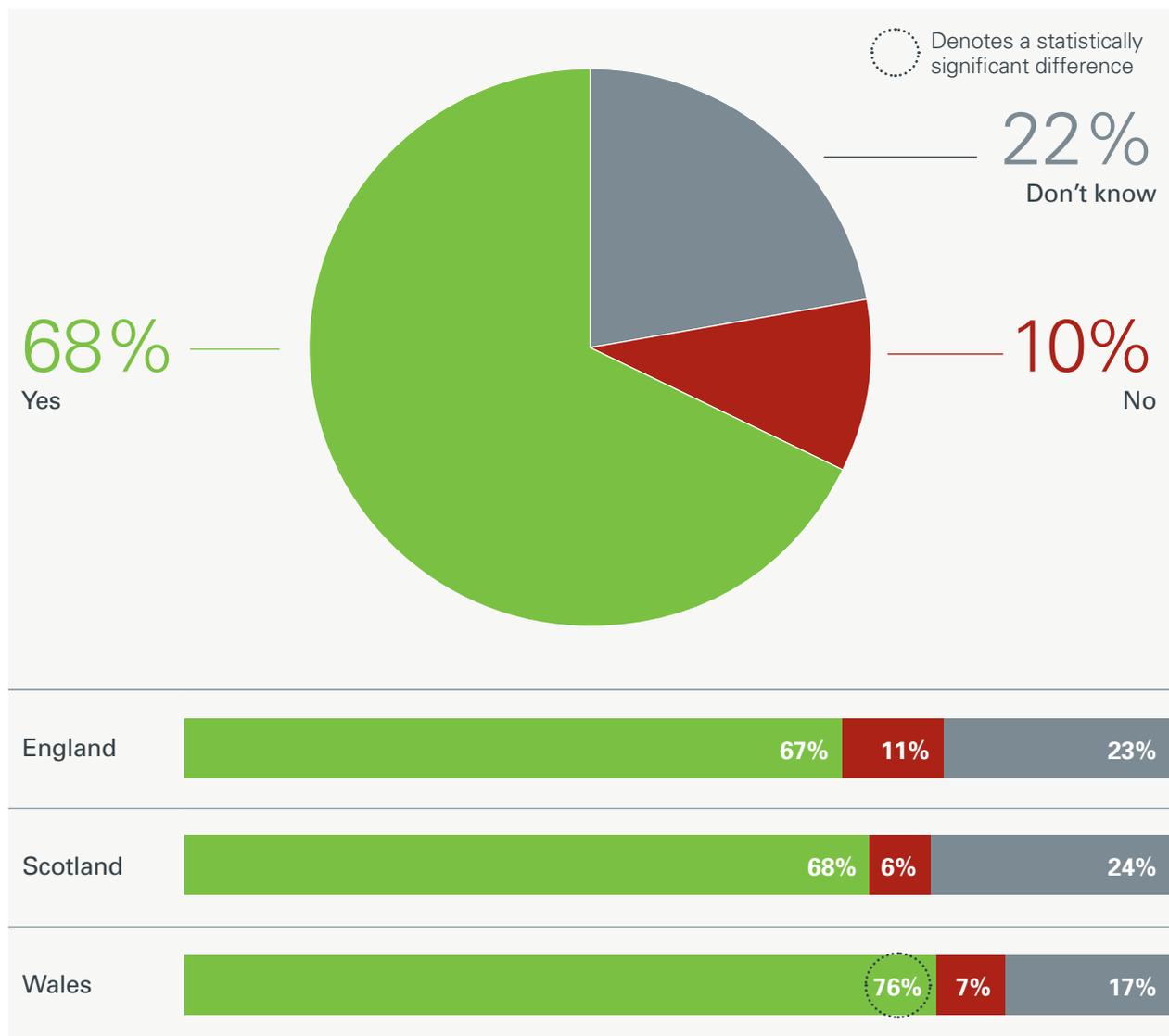


## Almost three quarters of consumers would be interested in community energy schemes, with residents in Scotland and Wales among those most interested



q17. Community energy is renewable energy generated by the community for the community. If the government introduced a scheme that made it easier for communities to set up their own locally owned solar or wind projects, with profits remaining in local hands, how interested or not would you be in joining?  
 Base: All respondents (2,005)

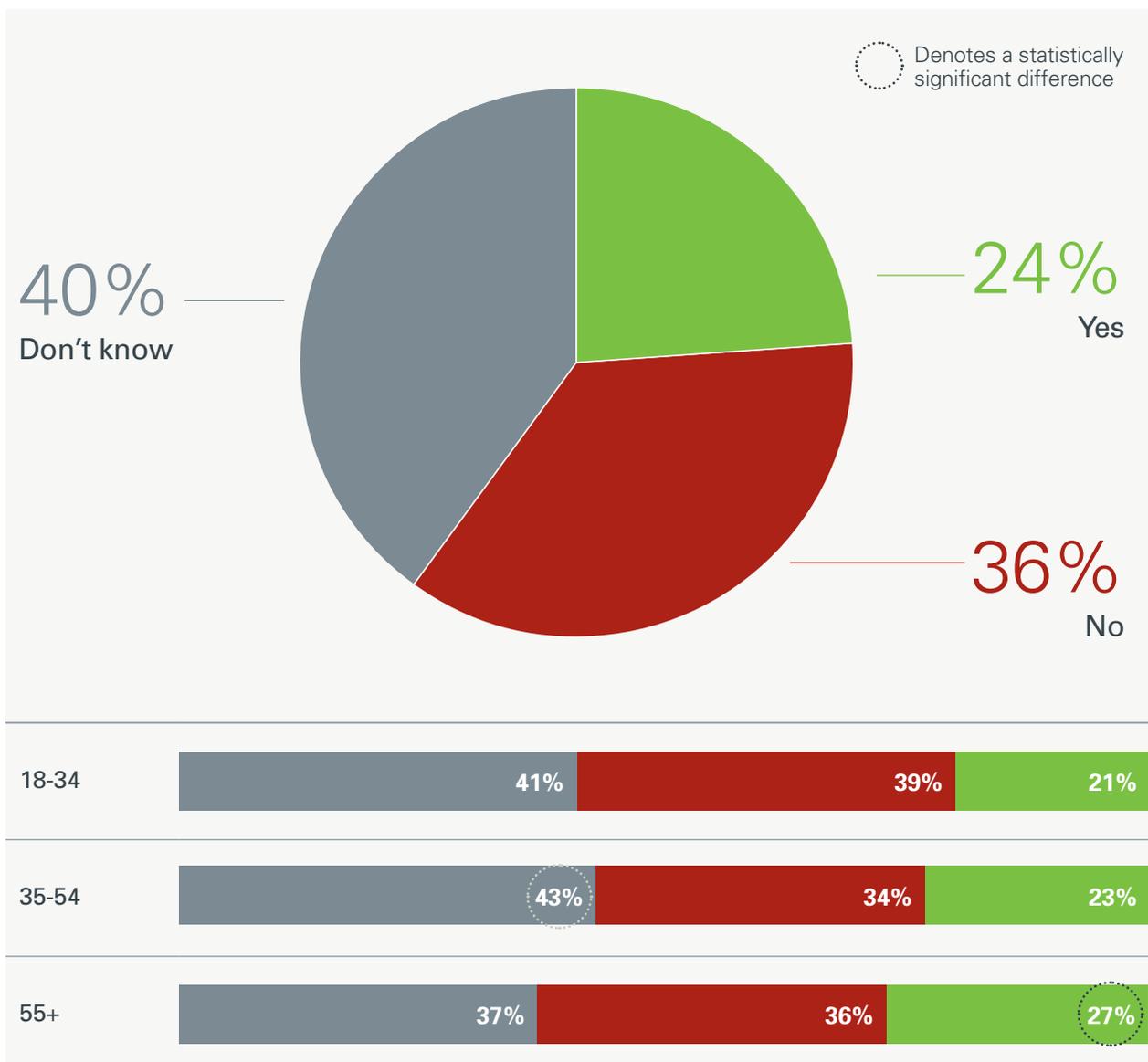
Over two thirds were in favour of breaking up the Big Six's market share to allow smaller, cleaner and locally owned energy systems to grow – with those in Wales significantly more in favour than those in England



Q18. The Big Six energy retailers currently control approximately 80% of the UK's household energy market. Should the market share of the Big Six be broken up to allow smaller, cleaner and locally owned energy systems to grow?  
 Base: All respondents (2,005); Scotland (177); Wales (100); England (1,679)



Biomass is currently classified as a clean, carbon-neutral energy source, but only a quarter of respondents agree with this label, and two-fifths weren't sure



q21. Do you think biomass should be classified as a clean, carbon-neutral energy source?

Base: All respondents (2,005)



## Endnotes

1. <https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/analyses/attribution-of-the-2018-heat-in-northern-europe/>
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# ClientEarth is a charity that uses the power of the law to protect people and the planet.

We are international lawyers, scientists and policy experts, finding practical solutions for the world's biggest environmental challenges.

We are fighting climate change, protecting oceans and wildlife, supporting sustainable forestry, greening energy, making business more responsible and pushing for government transparency.

We believe the law is a tool for positive change.

From our offices in London, Brussels, Warsaw, New York City, Beijing and Madrid, we work on laws throughout their lifetime, from the earliest stages to implementation.

And when those laws are broken, we go to court to enforce them.

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