We're all ears

What you've told us about
our sustainability journey so far

Virgin media

Keep up

Here's what you've got to look forward to

Get it straight from our Chief Executive

Having spent the last few years focusing on making sure that Virgin Media's got solid foundations for building a responsible business, we felt it was the right time to reach out and listen to what people think about how we're doing.

We wanted to understand everyone's take on our sustainability journey, the progress we've made and where we're heading.

Being a Virgin company, we've always tried to use our brand to do things better. Sustainability is no different. In the last couple of years, we've launched our groundbreaking Virgin Media Pioneers programme and an innovative, exclusively digital approach to sustainability reporting. And in reaching out and engaging our stakeholders, we've tried to make it as fun, informative and Virgin as possible.

The conversations we've had with our staff, customers and top sustainability thinkers, have reinforced our belief that if managed responsibly, digital technology has the power to make great things happen, for our customers, their communities and Great Britain. 2012 is the year we want to prove this.

We hope this is just the start of a different kind of conversation about sustainability at Virgin Media. And we hope you'll join in at **virginmedia.com/sustainability**

Neil Berkett
CEO & Chair Corporate Responsibility Committee
Virgin Media

Executive summary

This is the first time Virgin Media has followed a formal process to talking to all of our different stakeholders about what we're doing to become a more sustainable business.

Getting out there and listening to what people expect from us is vital. Especially as we focus on how to make sustainability a big part of the way we do things around here.

As you'd expect from a Virgin brand, we wanted to make the experience as digital, interactive and fun as possible for everyone involved. We spoke to three groups of people – our staff, consumers and sustainability experts, to help us answer some big questions, like:

1 **What does it mean to be a responsible company?**

2 **Are we tackling the right sustainability issues?**

3 **What are our responsibilities as a digital provider?**

4 **How are we doing compared to other companies?**

5 **Are we doing a good job of explaining what we're up to?**

The topics and issues raised by our staff, customers and the experts were wide-ranging. But the issues that came up the most were things like:

- Our role in the debate about the social impacts of digital technology

- How we ensure customers get more positives than negatives from the digital world

- How we embed sustainability thinking more deeply into product and service development

And at the end of this report, you'll see what we're already doing to tackle these issues and what we've got planned for the future.

Introduction

We've only been around as a company since 2007, so we're still in the early stages of our sustainability journey. This is the first time we've followed a formal process to talking to all of our different stakeholders about what we're up to.

We have a strong commitment to involving all of our staff, consumers and sustainability experts in our journey as it evolves. But as a Virgin brand, we're keen to do things differently.

Over the last 12 months, we've been bringing our sustainability journey to life for people inside and outside our business.

We've had a lot of fun along the way – with over 100 staff members using handheld video cameras to help show what we're doing to become a more sustainable business. Take a look at the results on **virginmedia.com/sustainability**.

But we know that showing people what we're up to is only half the story. We also need to listen to what people both inside and outside our business are saying about how we're getting on and what we could be doing better.

And that's what this report is all about.

We want to answer some big questions about sustainability at Virgin Media, to make sure we're on the right track and help us plan for the future:

1 What does it mean to be a responsible company?

2 Are we tackling the right sustainability issues?

3 What are our responsibilities as a digital provider?

4 How are we doing compared to other companies?

5 Are we doing a good job of explaining what we're up to?

Not only are we the largest Virgin company in the world – we're the UK's leading entertainment and communications company, and the first and only company to offer TV, broadband, phone and mobile services all from one supplier. We're a big operation, with around:

- 800 different UK sites
- 186,000 kilometers of network
- 3,000 vehicles in our fleet
- 12,000 employees
- 10,000,000 customers

Our approach

We identified three audiences we wanted to involve in our We're all ears programme – staff, consumers and sustainability experts. But being a Virgin brand, we wanted to make the experience as digital, interactive and fun as possible for everyone involved. So, here's what we did:
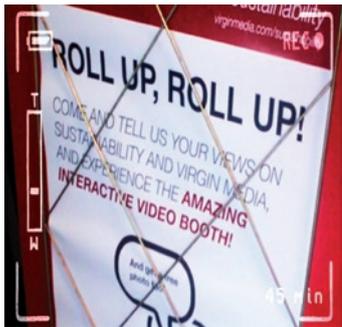
ABOVE Staff were invited to share their views in Photobot, our talking robot videobooth

Staff: We packed our bags and hit the road with *Photobot* – our very own talking robot videobooth. We visited five Virgin Media sites, which broadly represented the different parts of our business: our Corporate teams (Hook and Long Acre), our Logistics and Service Installation teams (Wellingborough) and our Customer Contact Centres (Bellshill and Wythenshawe). About 200 staff stepped inside the private booth to share their honest opinions with the ever-cheeky *Photobot*. They even got a photo souvenir to take home with them. We received loads of useful ideas and information about what our staff really think about sustainability at Virgin Media. The tour also confirmed just how much Virgin Media staff across the country enjoy dressing up in silly outfits!

Consumers: We invited consumers and non-consumers to take part in an online conversation about sustainability at Virgin Media, through an online forum organised by our Customer Insight team. Around 500 consumers and non-consumers make up the online panel and 82 people took the opportunity to have their say. We wanted to understand what issues matter most to them and the best ways to communicate what we're doing in the future. While we watched the debate with interest, we chose not to take an active role in moderation, as we didn't want to influence their thinking.

Experts: We invited five leading sustainability thinkers to honestly share their views about what we're up to. This isn't the first time we've sought external opinion, but we wanted to do it more formally. We spoke to:

John Elkington
Co-founder, SustainAbility
and Chairman of Volans

Alan Knight
Independent Sustainability Advisor

Sally Uren
Deputy Chief Executive, Forum for the Future

Jo Confino
Chairman, Guardian Sustainable Business

Rory Sullivan
Independent Consultant/Writer in
Responsible Investment

Our conversations were recorded and then transcribed. What we heard was really inspiring – and it gave us credible, objective feedback on our progress so far. As part of a related project, we also asked the experts to share their observations and predictions about the past, present and future of sustainability reporting with us. As a company that's taken an exclusively digital approach to reporting, it's something we're really interested in. We've used their insights to create an interactive timeline – ready for you to explore at **virginmedia.com/sustainability**.

We know our approach isn't perfect. For example, the staff and consumers we spoke to put themselves forward, so they were quite likely to be engaged in sustainability already, rather than representative of a wider audience. But it's an important first step for us in formalising the way we talk to people about our sustainability journey.

What we heard – the big issues

The topics and issues raised by our staff, consumers and the experts were wide-ranging. With so many conversations going on, there were loads of useful and insightful perspectives to consider. This section of the report groups and prioritises everyone's opinions and comments into themes, based on how frequently they came up.

Staff

The top things we heard about:

- Being a responsible company

- Embedding sustainability in our business

- Social impacts of digital technology

- Our role in making sure the positives of the digital world outweigh the negatives

- Our role in the community

- Supporting young people

Being a responsible company

All the staff we spoke to told us that there's a lot more to business than just making profits. Everyone also said they considered Virgin Media to be a responsible company. Not surprisingly, this meant different things to different people, but the main themes included things like waste and recycling, reducing our carbon footprint, treating staff well and the contribution we make to charity and the local community. Talking to our staff reinforced how the little things we're doing matter just as much as the big things.

"I think we are trying to do everything we can to go with the green agenda: something as simple as changing the paper in the offices. We should have been doing it for ages but it has now made a big impact in the way people think – especially when it comes to printing things out."
Staff member, Long Acre

What's more, a big majority said that it personally mattered to them that Virgin Media is a responsible company.

"It does matter to me personally, yes. I don't think I would like to be in a place of work where the company didn't take its responsibilities seriously – a money machine where nothing else mattered. No, I wouldn't like that and don't think I would continue to work for a place like that."
Staff member, Wythenshawe

"It's about the reputation of the company you are working for and you want to be proud of it. Virgin Media gives a good impression and always gets a good response."
Staff member, Hook

"I think we are responsible and have got a lot better at it over the last few years and made a conscious effort to improve in that space. From an environmental perspective in terms of recycling and carbon footprint, I think we are a responsible company. I think all the work we do in the community with projects and charity makes us a responsible company, even more so."
Staff member, Wythenshawe

Embedding sustainability in our business

Everyone we spoke to recognised that helping the company make progress on sustainability wasn't just the job of the CEO or the Sustainability team; it's something that everyone should be responsible for.

"It's a bit of a cliché, I know, but it's down to everyone. It needs to come from the top down but ultimately we all have responsibilities – that role to play to make sure that the company we work for is responsible. But ultimately our Leadership team needs to set the tone and set an example of what they would like to see. Then every individual who works for the company needs to play their part in making that happen."
Staff member, Wythenshawe

However, some people felt that we could be doing more to help people understand the big issues, too.

"I think some people don't actually understand what sustainability actually means and if that's so, they can't contribute. Today, I could direct people towards good content that the company produces, by putting a link on my email. We need to address certain behaviours and make sure it is on the agendas at meetings. In the future, we need to make sure it is always on the agenda of what we do."
Staff member, Long Acre

Some of our staff also felt we could be doing more to embed sustainability thinking into our product development, especially when it comes to the environmental impact of our products and services in our consumers' homes.

"Virgin Media is definitely making steps in the right direction but I think there are some bigger challenges ahead. Even in the way we produce our products, I know there are some things like the consumption of electricity in consumers' homes that need more time spent on innovation to solve them."
Staff member, Long Acre

"On a functional level our products and services – our digital services allow people to entertain themselves and to keep in touch with the world. At an individual level, they allow people to express themselves by what they see, watch, create or share. At a social level, our services open up social mobility, they support freedom of thought, create independence. It would be hard to imagine some of the things that have happened in the Arab Spring, for example, and ignore the role that digital media has played in that. From watching X Factor to changing a bad government – it's incredible."
Staff member, Long Acre

ABOVE About 200 staff shared their views with the ever-cheeky Photobot, our talking robot videobooth

Social impacts of digital technology

It's probably because they work for the UK's leading provider of digital services, but our staff were pretty knowledgeable when it came to explaining the huge positive changes digital technology has had, not only on our everyday lives, but also in terms of much bigger societal and even political shifts.

"I can speak to people I wouldn't be able to normally. I can connect with family in America and my wife who is studying in the US. It enables more connectivity with people."
Staff member, Wythenshawe

"It has changed things considerably, for the better. You can shop online and get extra channels on TV. You can save time by doing everything on the net. I can work from home sometimes, which is always a bonus. It means I can juggle my time."
Staff member, Bellshill

But they also recognised the potential downsides of our increasingly digital lifestyles. Many of our staff pointed to the negatives being about people interacting with each other less in the real world.

"I think the downsides are that not everyone has access. Some people, older people, are a bit scared of it. Some people can't afford it. It changes very quickly so people need reassurance that they are not going to be left behind. There are some rather sinister things like online bullying and porn, and it is certain that online services make those things more accessible to people that wouldn't have had access before. But on the other hand, people are alerted to it and can respond to it. I think the positives definitely outweigh the negatives."
Staff member, Long Acre

"I think the negatives are the way you feel it is detaching you from people. Everything is

online. Before, with banking, you would go to the bank and meet with the cashiers and staff. But not any more."*
Staff member, Wellingborough

"Using Facebook as an example: you can keep in touch with friends who are quite far away. But sometimes it becomes the only way you communicate – through Facebook or Twitter, rather than actually having a physical contact with someone."
Staff member, Bellshill

Our role in making sure the positives of the digital world outweigh the negatives

The staff we spoke to felt that although we've already got some great services in place to make sure people are safe and protected while enjoying the digital world, as a company we could do more to help our consumers get the best out of digital technology.

"We are already doing a lot in the social space in trying to get broadband out to people. We are doing a lot in schools and with older people. So, I think we should keep doing that. But I think the company should take a very definite stance on online bullying and pornography. We don't tend to say very much. We could have a point of view and I think people would listen because of the brand. That is I guess how we could make a difference."
Staff member, Long Acre

"Education is a big part of it. We should always be talking and having an open dialogue with our consumers, to let them know about our products, like broadband safety features. And more than anything, we should be a company that has an opinion on these things and is always looking out for our consumers."
Staff member, Long Acre

ABOVE **Charity champions at our Hook office**

Our role in the community

Our staff see Virgin Media's role in the community as being about a lot more than just writing cheques for good causes. The people we spoke to would like to be involved in activities that make a real and lasting difference, but not everyone knew that Virgin Media offers a paid day off to staff volunteering for local projects.

"We should have a big presence in the community and get involved with local projects and the environment. Even getting the local population involved. I think volunteering is a really good idea. We have done things in the past and everyone has enjoyed it."
Staff member, Wythenshawe

"Virgin Media does a lot of charitable work, but needs to do more around specific projects that people can identify with... People want something tangible that relates to the contribution. Not money thrown in a bucket."
Staff member, Hook

"Everyone has a role to play in their local community. It is interesting what that local community is, since we are dotted about all over the UK – we have offices all over the country. We employ lots of people, we are a part of a local community and we need to be involved. I think we already do a lot in terms of charity, in terms of our centres and it is something we all really enjoy in the team. We get involved in a lot of charity stuff, but it is also about everything we do and doing it in a sustainable way and making that important."
Staff member, Long Acre

Supporting young people

There was a huge amount of support among our staff for Virgin Media's focus on supporting young people. Our Virgin Media Pioneers programme, which provides support and advice to budding entrepreneurs, was identified as a really strong project.

I am not far off being a 'young person' myself and this is important to me. We are a young brand with a youthful spirit and I think there is a lot we can do for young people. It's a tough time at the moment – if you're 16 to 24/5, there aren't as many opportunities as there were a few years ago and there's lots of ways that we can help as part of that – connections with government and other businesses but also simple things like employing people and having our own apprentice schemes and products and services that are useful for young people.
Staff member, Long Acre

I think Virgin Media Pioneers is an excellent example of the support we should be giving to young people, by helping them, inspiring them and supporting them to achieve their dreams.
Staff member, Long Acre

However, our staff also suggested that they would like to see even more practical help on offer, through things like work experience and apprenticeships.

"Offering apprenticeships and helping them find jobs and experience would be a brilliant way of doing that. Putting under 18s in a call centre and giving them a bit of experience. It would be a big help. This kind of work experience would give them an insight into what Virgin Media does."
Staff member, Bellshill

The top things we heard about:

- **What sustainability issues matter the most**

- **Big companies and sustainability**

- **Responsibility in the digital world**

- **Our role in helping people get the best out of digital technology**

- **Our sustainability website**

Consumers

Which sustainability issues matter the most

Like our staff, the round table members tended to associate the idea of sustainability with environmental issues. They identified excess packaging, waste and recycling, energy consumption, carbon emissions, depletion of natural resources and global sourcing as the main issues.

"Companies should be reducing waste in terms of packaging and waste associated with production, as well as recycling more."
Virgin Media consumer

"As Virgin Media's business is totally dependent on electricity, Virgin Media should be at the forefront of providing equipment that is highly efficient. Virgin Media has about five million cable consumers and if they're all using V+ type boxes then those boxes alone consume about 4 million kilowatts a DAY!"
Non-consumer

"'Carbon neutral' seems to be the buzzword these days. Companies need to make sure they offset any carbon emissions that they create."
Virgin Media consumer

"The key responsibility for companies is the environment, and renewable energies. These need to be invested in, so that future generations will not be disadvantaged."
Non-consumer

"We need to source more products locally, so we are not making a large footprint by bringing them in from China (most electricals or other non-consumables come from there it seems) just because it is cheaper to make."
Virgin Media consumer

Big companies and sustainability

Our online forum members confirmed that sustainability is an important issue to them, and that both companies and people can have a positive impact.

"We certainly do need to protect our planet for our future generations and we all need to play our part in that, especially big companies."
Virgin Media consumer

However, as more companies begin to communicate their sustainability initiatives, there appears to be growing suspicion about companies simply paying lip service, and the need for openness and transparency.

"I'm rather cynical on this subject. I work for a large company who have made a big deal about being sustainable, reducing the amount of waste they send to landfill and being carbon neutral. It all sounds well and good but when you get down to detail it's all about saving money. I find it somewhat hypocritical to give these measures green credentials when the motivation is purely profit."
Non-consumer

"Larger corporations may say they want to be environmentally friendly but they are profit driven and have shareholders to answer to. We consumers are also guilty as we are looking for the cheapest price, and I also feel that we have become cynical of some of the claims by companies."
Virgin Media consumer

Responsibility in the digital world

Members of the round table felt that the key issues we would associate with our sustainability story, like network and traffic management, privacy and data protection, child protection and online crime, for example, should be seen as part of our standard practice. Many people disagreed that these issues were core to their idea of sustainability.

"I don't think you can really call it sustainability, it seems to me to be good business practice and the promise of good service for your consumers."
Non-consumer

"Making sure your network is top-notch – this should be a no-brainer. The quality should be top notch, given the costs people pay. We 'expect' this – this is the service provider's responsibility."
Virgin Media consumer

Although opinions on the principal responsibility for each issue vary to an extent, the majority verdict was that:

- Responsibility for the network lies with Virgin Media

- Responsibility for issues such as online crime and data protection lies jointly with individual consumers and Virgin Media

- Responsibility for keeping children safe online lies mainly with parents, but Virgin Media can play a role in educating parents about how to keep their children safe online.

ABOVE 82 people took part in an online conversation about sustainability at Virgin Media

Our role in helping people get the best out of digital technology

Even though these issues were considered to be separate from the sustainability agenda by members of the round table, they were all considered to be important. There wasn't a huge difference between them, but the top ranking issue appeared to be data protection.

"Data protection is the most important issue for me. Virgin has a responsibility to safeguard consumers' data and should be continuously testing and improving their security."
Non-consumer

Without absolving themselves of their own responsibilities, round table members welcomed the idea of Virgin Media taking a more proactive approach in contacting, warning, educating and helping people with all issues associated with our increasingly digital lifestyles.

"Whose responsibility are these? All of ours, but Virgin Media has a responsibility and accountability in encouraging and driving the issues. Make sure you are being market leaders, being accountable, not just playing PR games."
Non-consumer

"Virgin Media should take responsibility shared with the consumer, however in many cases the consumer will need educating. Free advice on how to keep safe online would be a benefit, as well as putting structures in place on the network to prevent hacking."
Virgin Media consumer

Our sustainability website

When we launched our sustainability website over a year ago, the two audiences we had in mind were our staff and the sustainability community. As we think about how we can get our consumers on board with our sustainability journey, we were keen to hear their thoughts about the content on our site. While round table members welcomed the idea of a dedicated website, many felt the clarity of the website could be improved.

"Very interesting! It shows to me that Virgin Media are taking sustainability and environmental impact very seriously."
Non-consumer

"I like the site, especially how it has a variety of staff from different departments at Virgin Media, it gives it a real human feel."
Non-consumer

"I like the idea of the website and the fact that Virgin Media seem genuinely involved in their commitment to sustainability. However, as a website I don't think it is accessible enough to consumers."
Non-consumer

"As a website for the 'public' I didn't find it particularly easy to get what Virgin Media are doing."
Virgin Media consumer

"I genuinely applaud Virgin Media for being proactive in this important area. However, I really didn't like the website. It's cluttered, chaotic and whatever it is that Virgin Media is doing, it doesn't come through. I don't like having to mine for information – just tell us what you're doing in simple headlines."
Non-consumer
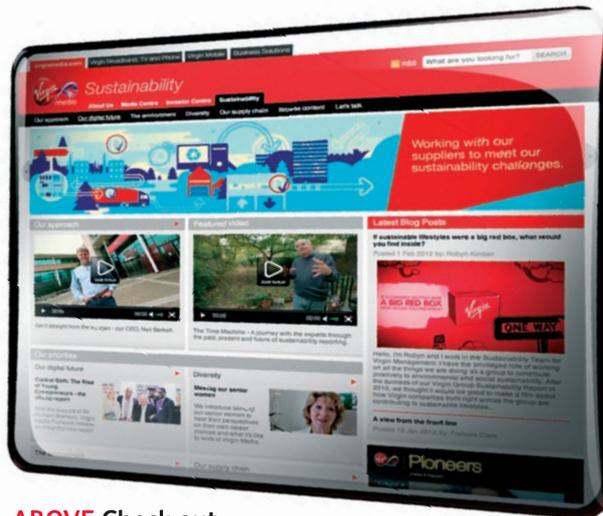
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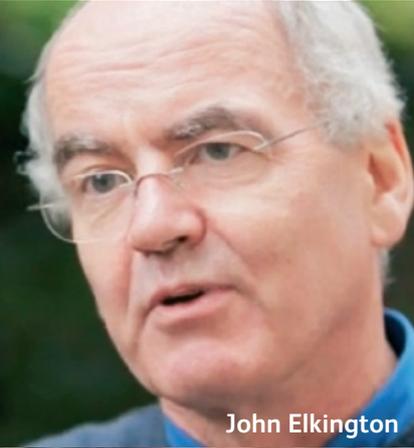
The top things we heard about:

- Our role in the emerging debate about the social impact of digital technology

- Engaging in a broader, deeper dialogue about our sustainability story

- Showing how sustainability is driving business value

- Explaining our vision for sustainability

- The environmental impact of our products and services in consumers' homes

- Our approach to sustainability reporting

- How we verify our content

- Making sustainability relevant to consumers

- How we present our data

Experts

Our role in the emerging debate about the social impact of digital technology

Unlike our consumers, the expert panel felt that issues around digital responsibility should definitely be part of our sustainability strategy. While the experts saw value in our goal to help people lead more sustainable digital lifestyles, they would like us to go much further to understand the impact of digital technology on people, their families and society, with some experts suggesting we should become much more interventionist in the online behaviour of our consumers.

"We now live in a very different world. People who are entering their 20s are brought up on a digital future – Googling, Facebook and all of that. Nobody knows – and this isn't a criticism of Virgin Media – but nobody actually knows what the positive and negative impacts of that lifestyle are. But what we do know is that it is a completely new lifestyle and what we are beginning to see now are sort of drip drips of some negativities. Children with exaggerated autistic behaviours, OCD, obesity. It's all linked with kids locked up in their bedrooms, talking to virtual friends (strangers) on the internet."
Expert one

"You have reached [10] million homes, so that's [25] million people. You can't just say, 'Oh well, we will just make sure the environmental footprint of our coding devices is as efficient as possible'. It's actually about what are you feeding to the hearts and minds of those people and where can you create influence. So if you are providing a diet of porn, gambling and whatever else and then say, 'We'll help you to navigate through that responsibly', well I don't get that."
Expert two

The experts recognised that this debate is going to happen with or without Virgin Media and felt that we should be clearer about our own perspective.

"You may come back and give 20 great reasons why content is nothing to do with you or where it is to do with you, but I don't remember seeing anything – that's why I am saying there's an elephant in the room, because it's fine if you want to justify why it's not relevant for you to do that, but you don't even do that. And that's why, as a stakeholder, I think it feels empty without that."
Expert two

"I am not saying you should lead it and I am sure that there are people already working on it, but if they asked you who are the top five workers on the long-term impacts of the digital lifestyle on teenagers, would you know who they are and would you have an opinion on what they are saying and doing? Do you fundamentally agree with them and support them to do more work or do you fundamentally disagree with them and if so, why?"
Expert two

But seeing as it's an emerging agenda, the experts thought that we do have an opportunity to lead the debate and actually drive change within the sector.

"When are you going to say, 'this is where I think our sector could be better? Let's set up an initiative to work together'? Sooner or later there is going to be a sustainable Digital Futures Group… all this negative work is going to lead to something, so pre-empt it."
Expert one

"I mean what are the conversations [around impact of digital content] and where are the boundaries? Where do they end? 'The pipeline is nothing to do with us, guv' – is that reasonable or not? You'll have a range of opinions but it's worthwhile exploring them and asking what is your relationship with the content providers around content? Can you have one and if so, what would it look like? What is in and what is out of that debate? And what are your relationships with those providers? All those, I think, are absolutely key."
Expert two

Engaging in a broader, deeper dialogue about our sustainability story

The experts welcomed the action we have taken to listen to and engage with our stakeholders, but they saw this as a first step towards a deeper engagement with opinion leaders and experts, not an end goal.

"I think what's missing is when are you going to get everyone in the same room together in front of your [senior] people? I know how difficult it can be – but Unilever's stakeholder approach is they get all their external people in the room in front of board members and everybody presents what they're doing and has a jolly good argument. It's really helpful. You know, sometimes it's all a bit too cloak and daggers, isn't it?"
Expert one

Some of the experts also felt that Virgin Media should start to engage more seriously with the investment community.

"There is a sort of disconnect with the US investors and the UK business and that's almost taken as a positive. I would say, well that may work on one level but actually is it reasonable to expect one's investors to build a relationship on debt and also to influence them on other things as well? Shouldn't they be educated and you work with them on these issues? So given that they are one of your core stakeholders, not to have a pipe between them looks like a weakness to me."
Expert two

"Corporate responsibility in the media sector is an emerging issue, but it is difficult to predict who will ask about it. What that means is that your CEO needs to be prepared to respond to questions and, as a minimum, to be able to explain your CSR strategy and how it adds value to the business."
Expert four

Showing how sustainability is driving business value

The experts felt that we hadn't yet been able to fully articulate how sustainability is driving business value at Virgin Media. They considered this important, not only in gaining the attention and support of senior management and providing focus for strategy, but also crucial if our investors are to take the agenda seriously. While recognising that it's not straightforward, the experts would like to see Virgin Media set targets on using sustainability to drive business value.

"What would be really brilliant and would be hard to do, would be to try and have a target around using digital media to build the brand on sustainability. So, in other words, if you got the communications right on this agenda, and used it to build your brand equity, it could drive sales; it could drive subscriptions to your services. Other companies are putting a target to that. For example, Kingfisher has got a target around increasing the sales of eco-products by x million. P&G have got a target; x% of revenue from sustainable products and services. What would be really smart would be some kind of target on using digital media to enable sustainable lifestyles, to increase subscriptions by x%. Because that is a direct play-through then to how sustainability will help you underpin the business going forward."
Expert five

"Your CEO will say 'Of course it's all about the products and the services we offer' whereas investors – as they should! – will say, 'That's fine but how are you going to make sure that translates into revenue?' The key is for your CEO to be able to explain how innovation and excellence translate into real tangible benefits such as customer retention, or getting customers to buy extra services. A degree of honestly is also appropriate; investors understand that many of the benefits are intangible and that some will inevitably take time to materialise in the top or the bottom lines."
Expert four

ABOVE Explore our interactive timeline on virginmedia.com/sustainability to find out about the experts' personal insights, and perspectives on the past, present and future of sustainability reporting.

Explaining our vision for sustainability

While the experts felt that we've done a good job of explaining the main areas of focus for our sustainability strategy, they also perceived a lack of clarity about our long-term vision.

"I guess that was the bit that wasn't there for me… which is 'What is the vision?' Though I totally understand how you can use digital media to influence lifestyles, the bit that was missing for me was – if that works, what does it look like? I think that it would be really useful to think about ten years' time. If you were truly sustainable and had pulled the essence of your business, your digital media to create sustainability for your consumers, what would that look like?"
Expert five

"What you are seeing right across business, is that the interesting businesses are making creative targets beyond their knowing how to create or how to meet them but also being far enough along to know they are not being ridiculous and ending up being beaten over the head. So I think you need a longer-term vision, so you know the direction you are going in."
Expert two

The environmental impact of our products and services in consumers' homes

Our panel also felt that while our environmental responsibility strategy generally seemed to cover the key issues, there was one important part missing from the story – clearly articulating the environmental impact of Virgin Media's products and services in consumers' homes.

"To what extent is your direct carbon footprint relative to the carbon footprint of householders? Are they actually living a higher carbon lifestyle or a lower carbon lifestyle as a result and what is the proportionality? It's like the famous soap powders, isn't it? 80% of the carbon footprint was how it was used in using the washing machine and not in the manufacturing of it. Do you have those numbers and are those numbers attainable?"
Expert one

"The other thing I see as missing in your reporting is information on the emissions and impacts associated with the products you sell and the services you provide. Paradoxically, this is where the biggest part of your footprint is and it is therefore a major omission."
Expert four

"I really liked your website. I really liked the films. I loved the CEO address. I thought it was very funny. I think it's quirky, it's funny, it's different and I think that's the way forward."
Expert five

Our approach to sustainability reporting

The panel suggested that we could think more carefully about how different audiences will use the website and how we can make it easier for them to find what they are looking for.

"One point I would make, is that you have to work out some way of working it out for people who just want a hard-nosed look at the business… and don't want to look at complicated studies and stuff… that they can go to."
Expert three

"At the moment, your reporting is essentially a grab-bag of worthy issues. You need to be much clearer about which issues are important to you, the business, and which are most important to different stakeholders."
Expert four

But generally, the experts were enthusiastic about our innovative and creative approach to making engaging sustainability content.

"I think it is on trend, even ahead of trend and more and more people are going to follow your approach. There is a general sort of joke out there that people write reports that nobody reads and they spend lots of money: so nothing but support from me."
Expert one

However, they were also keen to stress that we mustn't take our eye off the ball.

"As long as you have got the foundation of good targets then that's fine. So, as I was saying earlier, you need the hard targets in there to keep the investors happy and to keep NGOs happy, to keep you on your toes as a business."
Expert five

"The only risk of course is that you do it at the expense of just good governance and that while it is easy for me to say, 'Don't collect the numbers, they are really, really boring', make sure you don't have to take your eye off the ball and stop tracking the numbers."
Expert one

"I also think there is a risk in that because you are seeking to be different all the time and seeking to be innovative, you end up not necessarily doing the foundation stuff as well as you can."
Expert two

And it was highlighted that having great communications on sustainability means being more open to scrutiny. So it's essential to be completely authentic.

"The risk you have got at the moment [as a result of] your success is there are really good communications, which are award winning and people are noticing but then they are more likely to push you on a problem, and the risk is that you wouldn't satisfy them with your answer… and that would just reinforce 'This is just typical Virgin. This is just clever comms. They have got a really good video maker, they've got some really crazy thinking – I love it but it's packaging.'"
Expert one

"You don't get a sense of 'this is the degree of the challenge we don't know how to deal with' but maybe they don't exist [for your business]. I won't say it was rah-rah but the impression was given that you are very much on top of all of this. So, that would be my only comment there."
Expert three

As a result, the experts challenged Virgin Media to consider setting stretching, long-term targets for the business.

"If you are talking, to, for example, the head of sustainability at Pepsico, you know, and you say right, we can reduce our environmental footprint by 3% next year, and that's great. But if you say, 'Actually each of our manufacturing sites is using no water or has a 90% reduction, or nothing going to land-fill' – whatever the target is, that's a good target, then the 3% will be a good stepping stone towards that. But if you say 3% is the target and that is all you are going to aim for…"
Expert two

"To what extent is your needing to achieve a reduction of 15% [in carbon emissions] a stretch?' If it's not a stretch then it's not strong enough. You need to think 'Flipping heck! That's massive.' If it's just, 'We are going to change our hairdryers' and that sort of stuff, then it's not a stretch. How do you know that?"
Expert one

How we verify our content

The experts broadly agreed that making submissions to frameworks like the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) was not the right approach for Virgin Media. However, they did feel that we need to be clearer about our own verification and assurance processes.

"My position is that companies in the future will be judged on content and not numbers... if you have got the numbers anyway because that's how you run it, you might as well put them in the public domain... But where I think GRI starts to work against organisations is where you devote half your resource, which is limited to getting the GRI numbers, at the expense of the content."
Expert one

"I don't think it really matters whether you follow GRI unless... as long as you are clear about the materiality of your impact. The thing to think about perhaps is, can you perhaps get any external verification from one of the consultants to say that you are focusing on your material issues, and are reporting said issues in a transparent and robust manner? Because I think if you have that, you don't need to go down the GRI route... some of the GRI requirements just won't be relevant to you and you will just be ticking boxes..."
Expert five

"I just think you should be clearer on the website, if the website is your dominant communication channel, that you have actually considered those things and you have come out with a particular set of outcomes. If, for example, on assurance... you are going for a self-verification model where you are inviting people to disagree with you or deny what you're saying; if they know better... put that up there clearly..."
Expert three

Making sustainability relevant to consumers

Some of the experts felt that we've got a great opportunity to use our brand to engage consumers in sustainability and help them to lead more sustainable lifestyles. However, they suggested that we might need to use different language.

"I think you have got an amazing brand and amazing brand equity. I think that it would be really amazing if Virgin Media could make sustainable living easier and normal and you couldn't call it sustainable living – you could call it something else completely... Because as soon as you start talking about sustainable lifestyles it gets all worthy and people start to switch off."
Expert five

How we present our data

There were some challenges in terms of the robustness and credibility of Virgin Media's data and the quality of the data in terms of context and accuracy.

"The thing I found frustrating about your data is that it wasn't put into context. As just one of many examples, you provide information on the total number of mobile phones you reuse and recycle, but provide no information on the total number of mobile phones you sell. A related issue is that you don't explain how you have achieved your targets or, if they weren't met, why not. There is quite a lot of work required to put your data into context, because what you are doing is presenting trends but the trends are out of context."
Expert four
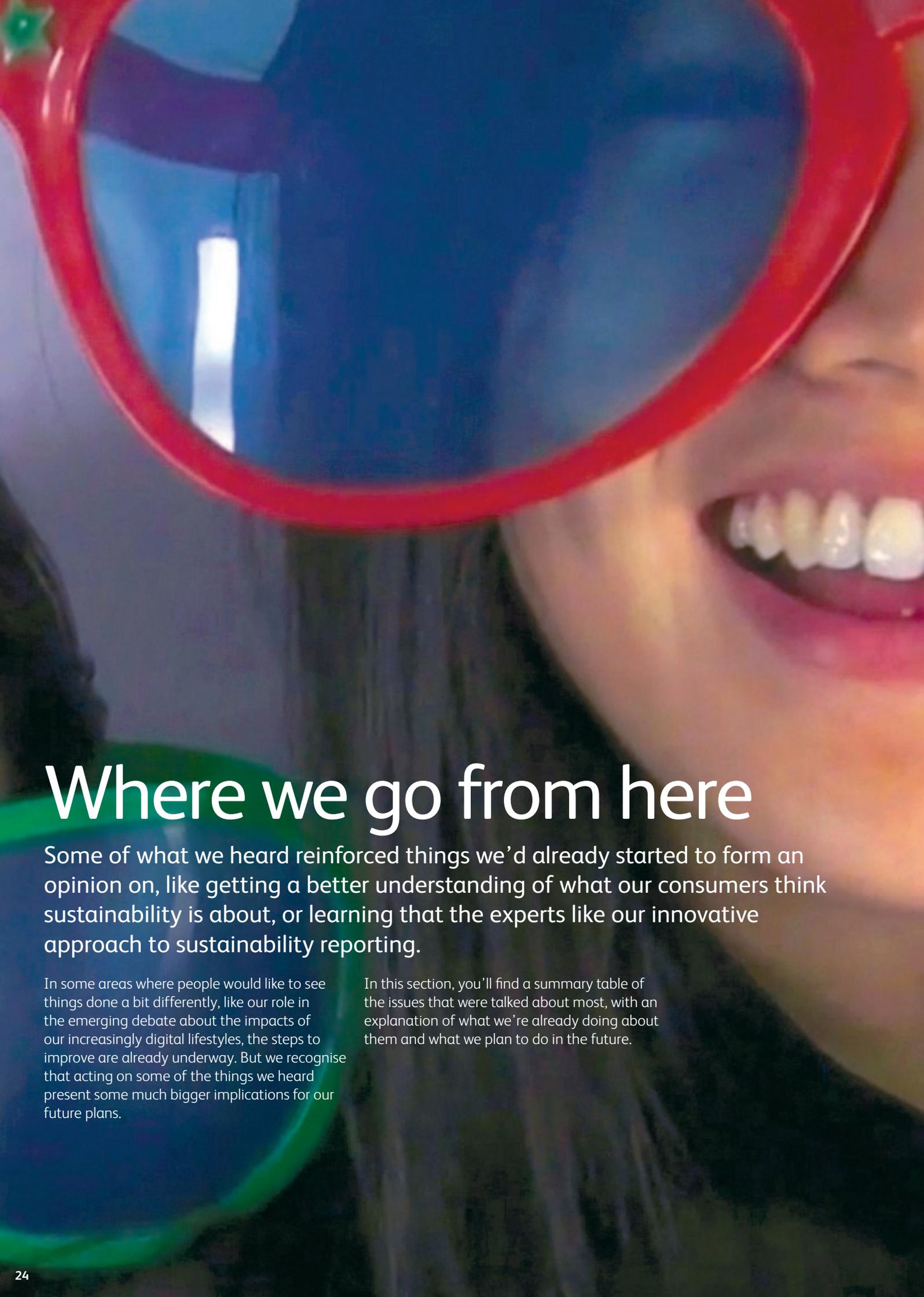
Where we go from here

Some of what we heard reinforced things we'd already started to form an opinion on, like getting a better understanding of what our consumers think sustainability is about, or learning that the experts like our innovative approach to sustainability reporting.

In some areas where people would like to see things done a bit differently, like our role in the emerging debate about the impacts of our increasingly digital lifestyles, the steps to improve are already underway. But we recognise that acting on some of the things we heard present some much bigger implications for our future plans.

In this section, you'll find a summary table of the issues that were talked about most, with an explanation of what we're already doing about them and what we plan to do in the future.

What we heard*	What we're doing today	What we plan to do in the future
Do more to help staff better understand sustainability issues and what they can do to contribute to the Virgin Media sustainability story.	In 2011 our focus was getting staff on board with our sustainability story, top down and bottom up. A big part of this involved getting our staff to help tell the story, by giving them video cameras to record what's going on behind the scenes. Our staff told us that we've made big leaps forward over the last year, but we know this is only the beginning.	In 2012, we're kicking off a project to help us embed sustainability thinking within the organisation so it simply becomes 'our way of doing business'. This means understanding how each internal department can contribute to delivering the different parts of our sustainability story, as part of what they do day to day.
Embed sustainability thinking more deeply into product and service development.	Our Sustainability team already works closely with our product teams to make sure that sustainability thinking is built into how they design and develop new products.	We'll be more proactive about communicating all the work that goes on behind the scenes to embed sustainability thinking into our products and services. We think this will also help drive momentum.
Do more to help consumers get more positives than negatives from the digital world.	Digital technology, just like our products and services, is evolving all the time. Up until now, we hadn't established a distinct Virgin Media approach to communicating the pros and cons of the digital world. We want to use our understanding and influence to show what our digital future might look like – helping our consumers to navigate through the good and bad. This is something we're already working on in 2012.	We're keen to understand the attitudes of British people when it comes to the digital world. That's why in 2012, we're kicking off a dialogue with UK consumers to understand attitudes on issues such as online behaviour, privacy and use of data, current and future lifestyles and the well being/social impacts of our products and services. We'll approach this in a typically innovative Virgin way and use our findings to engage a range of audiences, including our consumers.
Take a stronger role in the debate about the social impacts of digital technology.	We regularly engage in policy debates on a number of issues, from street works to child protection. We're not afraid to be vocal. In fact, we think this is something you should expect from a brand like Virgin Media. This exercise has reminded us that we should be pushing these debates internally and inviting our staff to get involved, as well as framing them for our consumers to understand, as and when appropriate.	We're looking to hold a conversation to seek external views on the pros and cons of the digital world. This conversation will include academics, politicians, futurologists, other leading thinkers and – most importantly – consumers. We hope the group will help us to: • Influence product development and help direct the policy debate in ways that will support our business strategy • Help us better demonstrate the social impact of our products and services • Help to pinpoint how digital technology will impact our future economy. We hope that the output will enable us to deliver on our goal of using digital technology to make good things happen. After all, we're committed to making sure people feel safe, confident and able to have a great time in the digital world. We can't share much more than this at this stage, but stay tuned – you'll be hearing lots more from us in 2012.

*Issues are not in order of priority

What we heard*	What we're doing today	What we plan to do in the future
Offer more practical ways to help young people in the UK today.	2011 has seen a big focus on young people – the business has been developing its understanding of the challenges facing young people across Britain to work out just what we can do to support them even further. During 2011, we involved nearly 2,000 young people in a conversation about what matters to them and what Virgin Media can do to help them get ahead. It's no wonder we heard our staff say they want to know how they can get involved practically, as we've been sharing snippets with them about what's to come as we go along. However, there are also some other very visible ways we're helping young people: Virgin Media's apprentice scheme is one of the most over-subscribed in the UK and offers national qualifications as well as the opportunity to develop a career through the business. Virgin Media Pioneers, our online community for entrepreneurs, has been providing great opportunities for young people, connecting them with each other to support their growing businesses.	2012 will see the Pioneers programme expand to encompass 'enterprising young people' more broadly – to include those from all backgrounds who want to find a way to help themselves. Our community of entrepreneurs will help inspire others into starting their own business or getting on the job ladder. We'll develop online tools to help young people set goals and follow them through, as well as providing offline events to help them gain new experiences and build their abilities. Local offices also choose to support schools and our Hammersmith office will be supporting the launch of a new 'Studio School' with a programme of staff and pupil sessions. We expect help from staff will come in many ways – we'll be relying on them to join in. Opportunities to help our 'enterprising young people' will kick off in Q2 and we'll be reaching out to staff to get involved early on in 2012. In 2012, we're exploring ways to develop the apprentice scheme to offer qualifications in new areas, along with developing the level of qualifications that the apprentices can gain.
Make sustainability more relevant and accessible for consumers.	Being a fairly young company, we've very much focused our efforts on getting our staff on board with our sustainability story, before proactively going out and speaking with our consumers. This exercise has reminded us about what is most relevant for and accessible to our consumers.	In 2012, we'll be talking to our consumers about the issues we know matter most to them. And we'll make sure we use the right kind of language.
Engage in a broader, deeper dialogue about our sustainability strategy, including GEC and investors.	We hope this exercise is the first step in a bigger conversation, with more people, about our sustainability strategy.	We have no further plans at this stage.
Find ways to articulate how sustainability drives business value.	Our current company perspective on sustainability is like that of many other companies – managing risk, creating opportunities and driving innovation. We recognise that we could better articulate the business case, both inside and outside our business.	In early 2012, we will convene a meeting with key people from across our business to reassess where we are today and the relevance to the business.

What we heard*	What we're doing today	What we plan to do in the future
Clearly explain our vision around 'sustainable digital lifestyles' and how we plan to get there.	The programme we will be launching in the next few months will help us to articulate our vision. Our learning from this exercise is that we need to start with our consumers, not the story we want to tell.	We'll identify milestones in our activity next year that will help us plan how our vision can become a reality.
Show more clearly the impact of products and services in consumers' homes.	Over the last couple of years, we've been working to improve the accuracy of data, in particular our Scope 3 emissions that relate to the emissions of our products from consumer use. This exercise has shown that we need to make this more readily accessible.	We'll provide more easily accessible information on issues such as the power consumption of our set top boxes. We will also work with internal teams to ensure that consumer facing staff are better equipped to be more vocal on these issues.
Be clearer and more transparent on the verification and assurance processes of reporting.	We're not out to win any awards for our materiality assessment – we like to think we take the kind of pragmatic approach you'd expect from a brand like Virgin Media. In fact, our approach is common to all the companies across the Virgin Group. We use a methodology called Product Story to identify which issues we believe are most material. The premise is "If our products could talk, what would they say?" This approach has helped us to really focus on the issues core to our business and operations – and this simple approach means that we've avoided time-consuming and costly materiality assessments. We do, however, follow the same principles that the GRI framework sets out, such as accountability and transparency.	We plan to provide a more transparent narrative about our verification and assurance processes.

We'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of those involved.

About this report

Our Sustainability team led the involvement with the participating stakeholders, but the analysis for our We're all ears programme and this report have been produced by a third party (Given London), helping us to present an honest and transparent account of what we heard. Each member of the expert panel has also approved the content featured in the expert section. The findings from this report were discussed at our CR Committee meeting on 13 January 2012, chaired by our CEO. You can find their reflections in the Executive summary.

Disclaimer: We've worked hard to ensure our conversations have been reported accurately but some of the information, in particular facts and figures given, might not be factually accurate about Virgin Media and rather just reflect third party opinion.

To watch the We're all ears film that accompanies this report, and to find out more about sustainability at Virgin Media, go to **virginmedia.com/sustainability**