

Scottish policy-makers' Views on Natural Capital Changes from 2023-25

Kerry Waylen, March 2026



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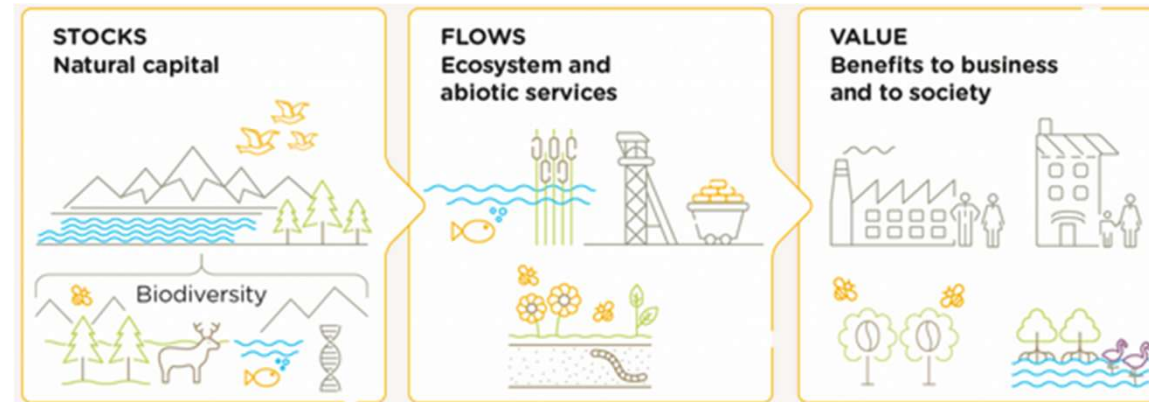
Why study Natural Capital (NC)

Intended to ‘mainstream’ nature into decisions across sectors

- Makes nature visible in economic terms that dominate much decision-making
- Intended to improve those decisions to benefit nature *and* people (Bateman et al, 2020)



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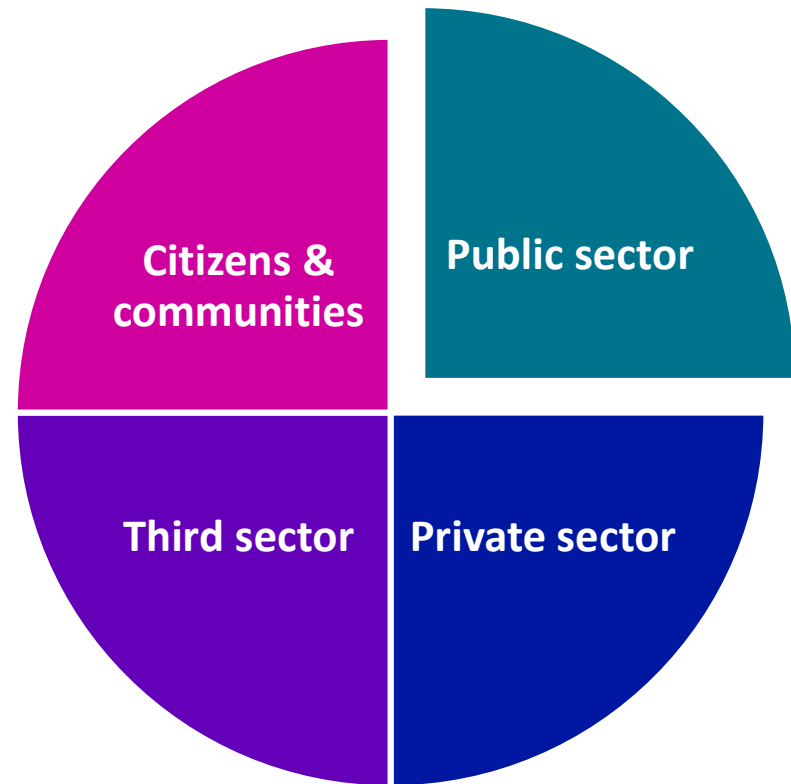


<https://capitalscoalition.org>

Does NC fulfil this promise?

Why study the public sector?

- We need to ‘mainstream’ nature across all society & sectors – this includes private sector actors, citizens and also public sector.
- This includes policy domains not typically associated with the environment – e.g. Transport, Housing - as many policy areas are dependent on nature & affect nature (Maes, 2020).
- So studying policy development is relevant – see our main project website for our work focused on other sectors.



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Why study Scotland?



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Pioneer in endorsing and encouraging working with NC:
several years of work now.

- Data, metrics & analyses (Scottish Government, 2025)
 - NCAI (Natural Capital Asset Index)
 - Natural Capital Accounts
- Endorsed as a goal and relevant to policy development
 - E.g. NC team, some strategic documents
 - Also at UK-level, esp Enabling a Natural Capital Approach (ENCA) supplementary green book guidance
 - Focal policy areas: Enabling and governing new investments in nature - Nature Capital Market Framework, investment-readiness funding for nature restoration teams; Regional land use planning - Landscape Tool developed by NatureScot
 - But cross-cutting concern – e.g. has been part of National Performance Framework

Is there confidence yet in working with NC?



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What did we do?

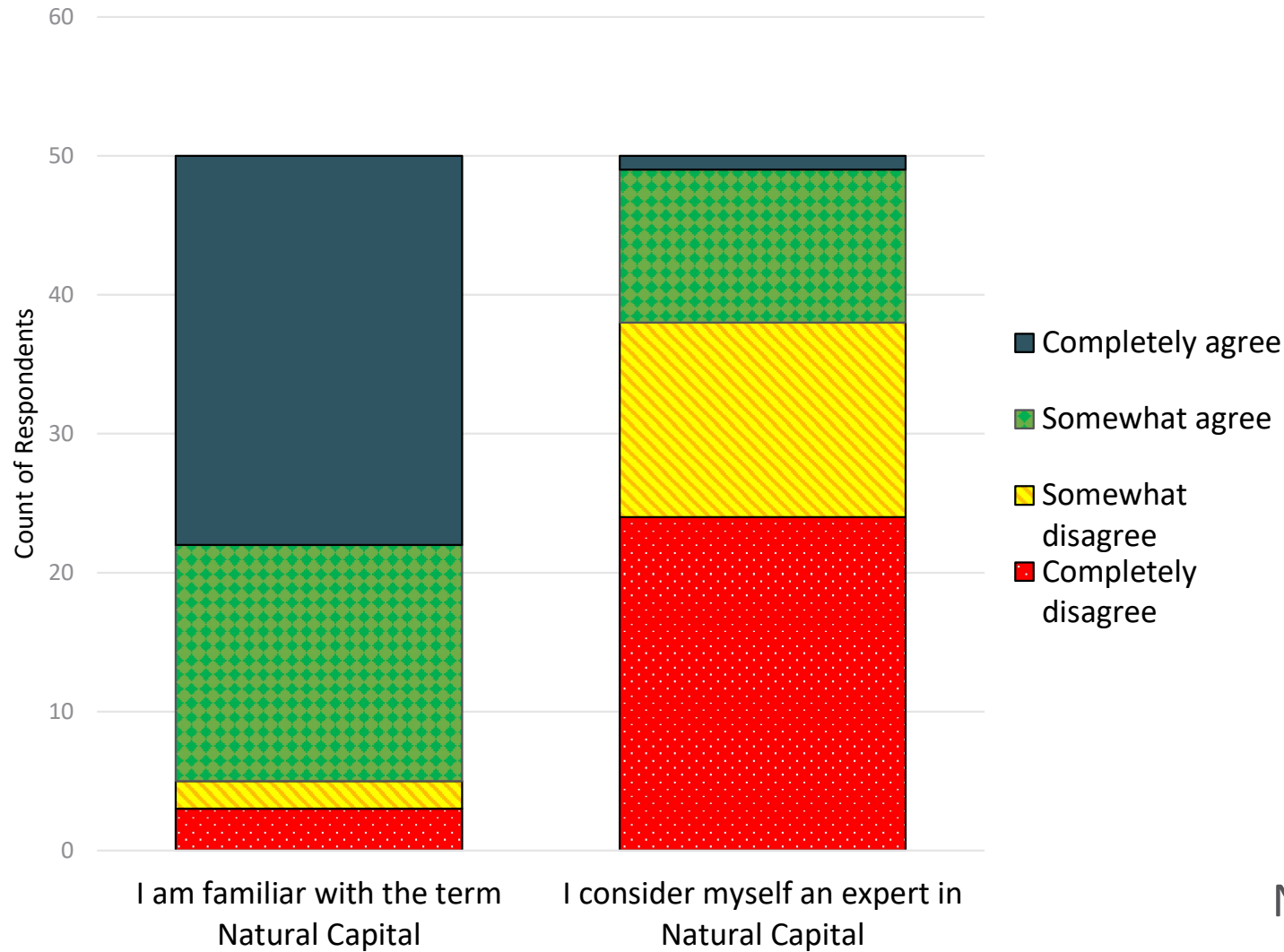
- In late 2023 we distributed an online survey across several teams in the Scottish Government, we asked about their familiarity with NC & any links with their work; 50 staff took part
- We repeated this identical survey in late 2025; 48 staff took part (but only 42 for most of it)
- See Waylen et al, 2026 for full method + 2023 results

What did we find? How did things change 2 years later?

2023 - Are people familiar with NC?



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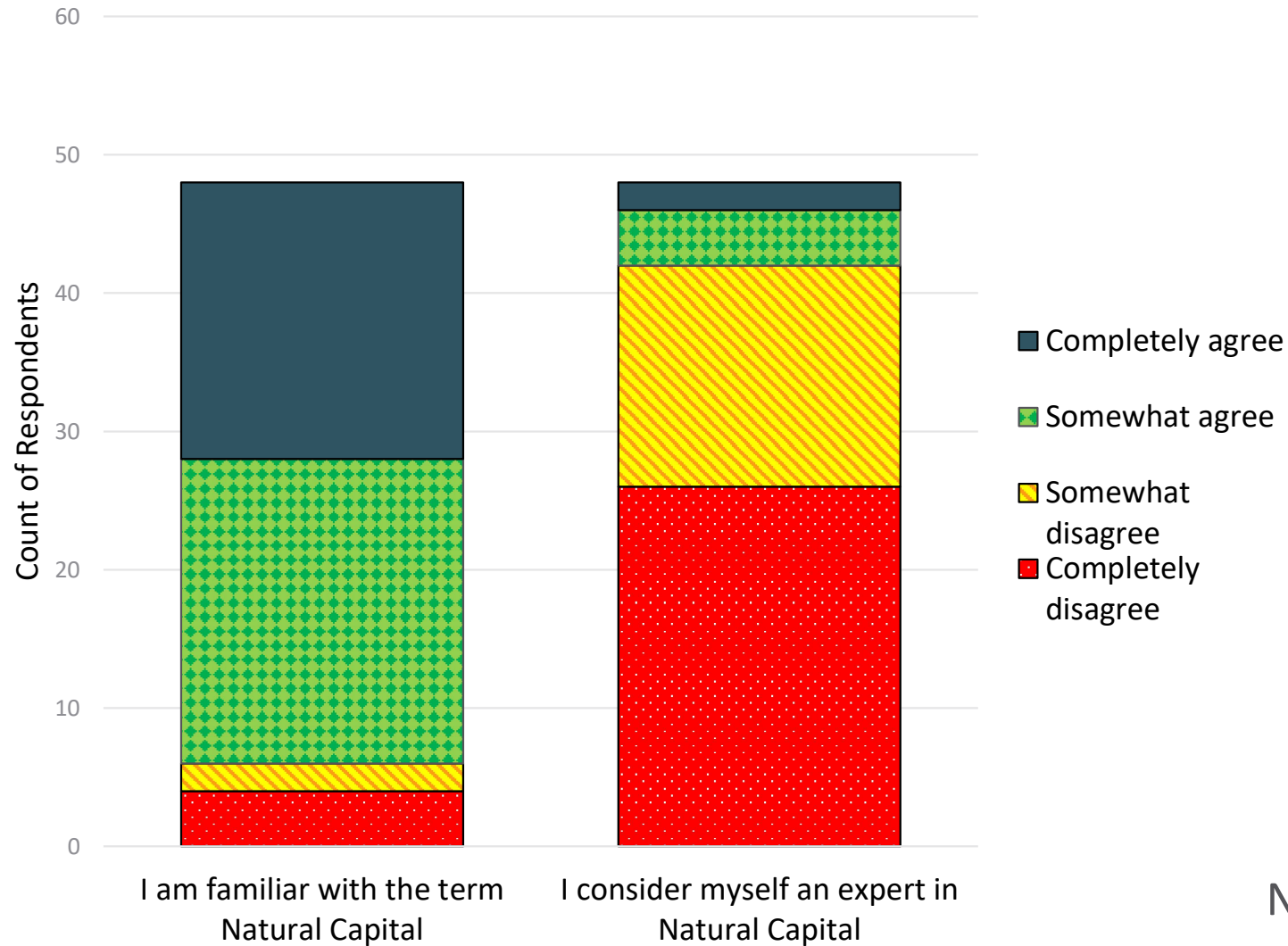


N=50

2025 - Are people familiar with NC?



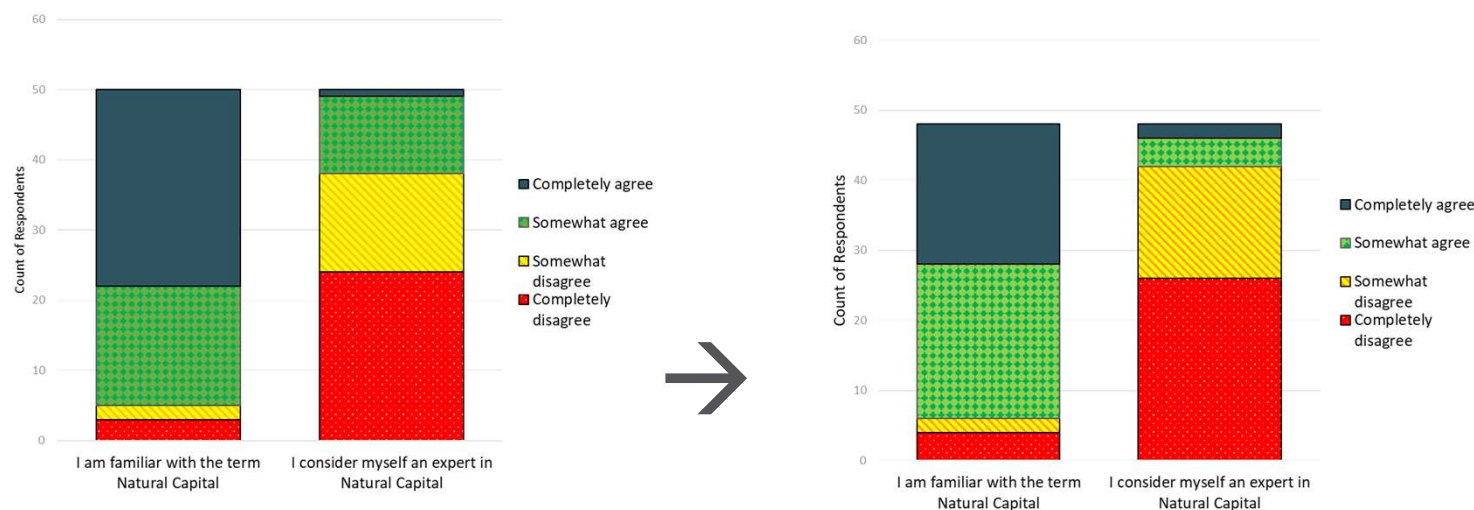
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2023 → 2025



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Not much change – if anything, 2025 are less confident. However, note at least 1 mentions reading recent SG reports on Natural Capital – some effect of communication of this subject

How do people understand NC?



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Analysis of open text answers

- Definitions of Natural Capital mostly align with standard definitions, with varying amounts of detail

The value of nature (e.g. peatland) and products of nature (e.g. peat), not just in monetary terms but for other benefits they provide too such as flood prevention, recreation etc.

The use of nature to benefit humans and the economy

How do people understand NC?



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For whom or what situations is it useful?

- Appraising planning developments, impact assessments
 - Any sorts of decisions...
or...specialist discussions for
land management, marine..
 - Less consensus!
- “It's relevant for policy teams that have oversight of natural assets or benefit from the ecosystem services provided by natural assets”
- valuable to land owners and rural economies
- It's relevant for everything
- “it's a niche concept”

How do people learn about NC?



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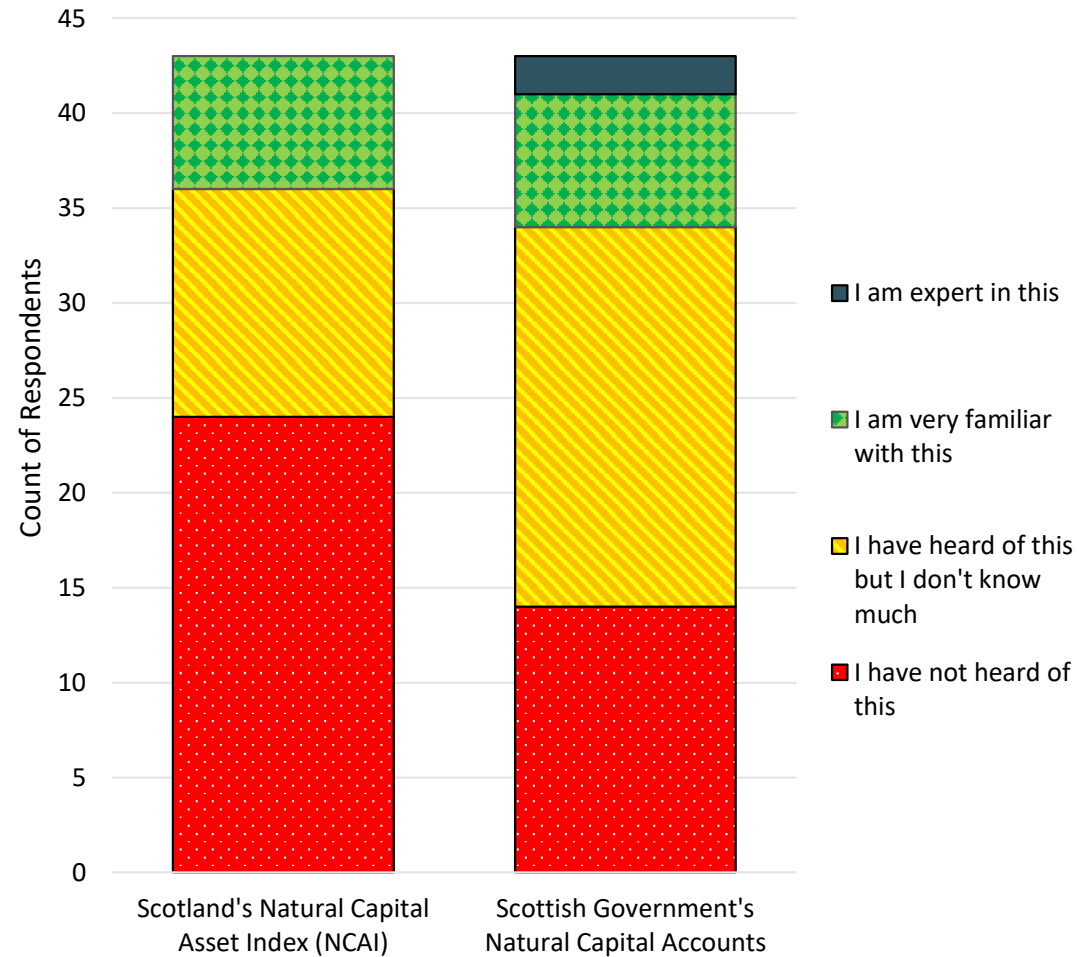
- Many references to university education
- On the job:
 - economist seminars
 - via roles in environmental policy teams
- Specific reports and events:
 - Dasgupta review, NatureScot talk, NC Accounts releases

Learned by osmosis from talking with colleagues who are more expert on it than me

2023 – Familiarity with Scotland's NC data



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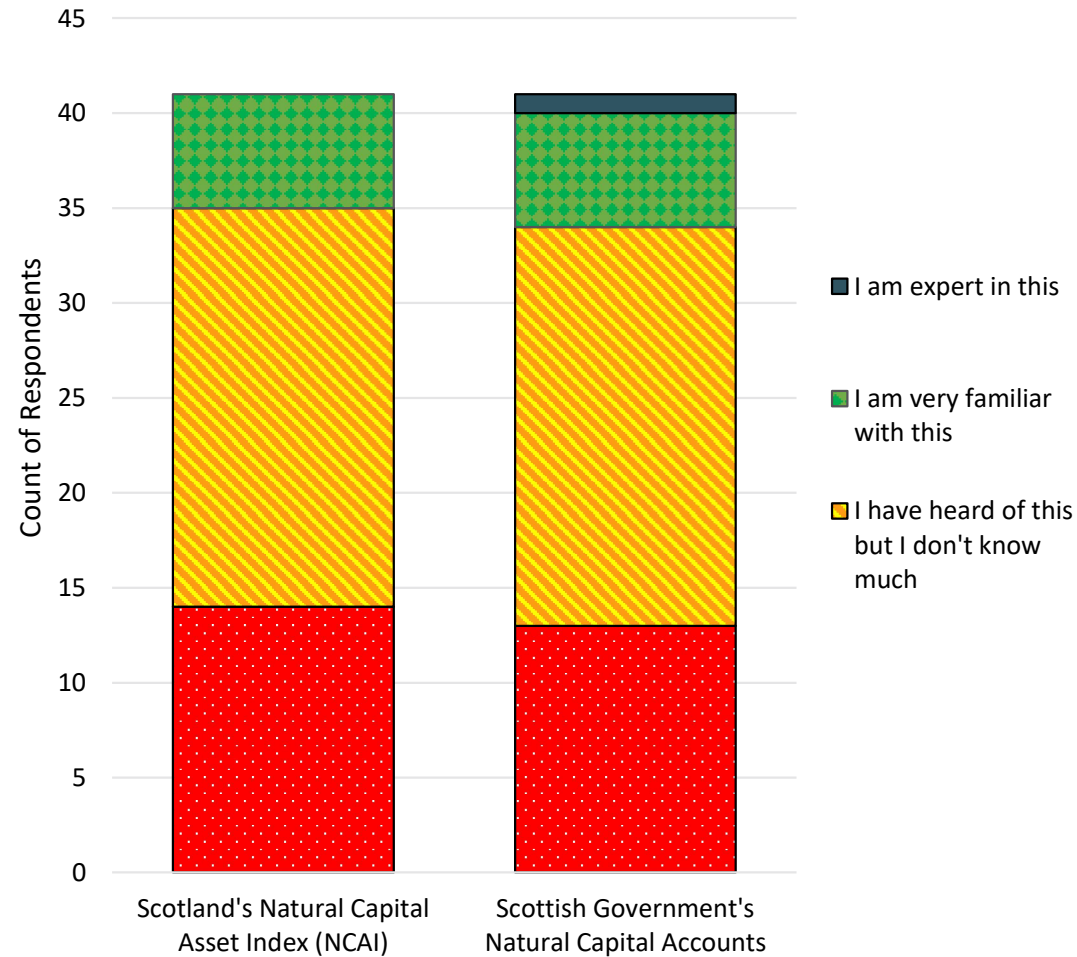


N=43

2025 – Familiarity with Scotland's NC data

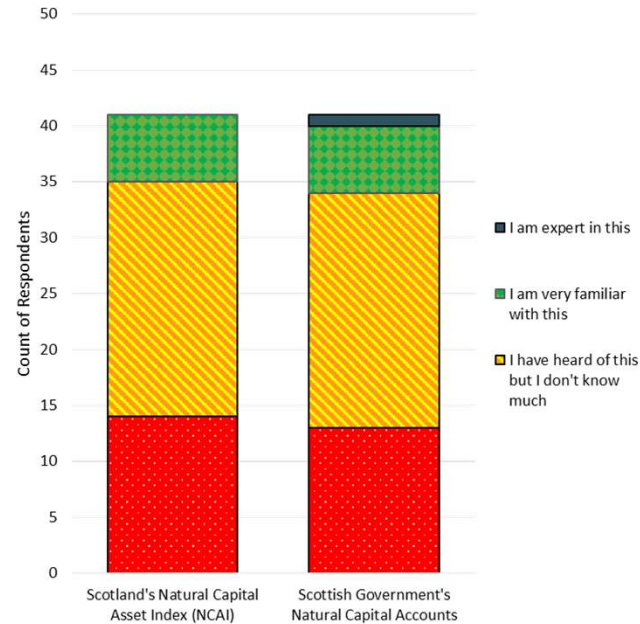
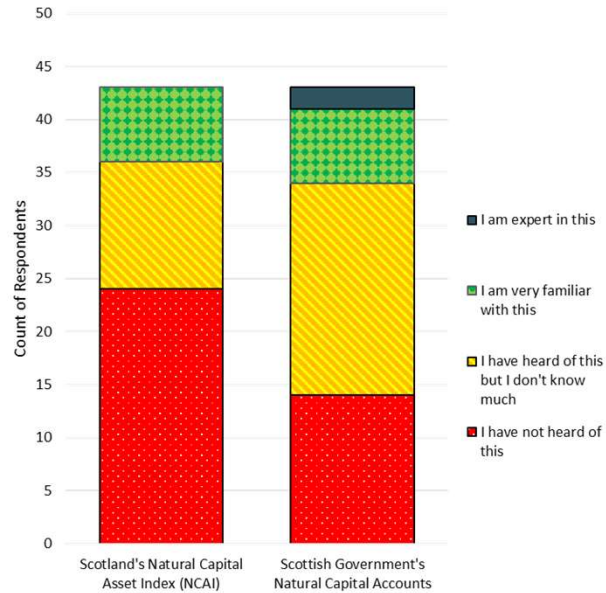


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N=41

2023 → 2025



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- No radical changes over 2 years, but more familiarity with NCAI

We also asked about “ENCA”

- ENCA = Enabling a Natural Capital Approach
- Supplementary guidance to the Green Book
- A toolkit of datasets, tools, case studies related to Natural Capital
- Especially oriented to policy analysts

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/enabling-a-natural-capital-approach-enca>



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Bring photo ID to vote Check what photo ID you'll need to vote in person in the General Election on 4 July.

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Guidance

Enabling a Natural Capital Approach (ENCA): Guidance

Enabling a Natural Capital Approach (ENCA) guidance is a comprehensive document providing information and resources for Natural Capital.

From: [Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs](#)

Published 22 January 2020

Last updated 19 July 2023 — [See all updates](#)

 [Get emails about this page](#)

Documents



[Enabling a Natural Capital Approach guidance](#)

HTML

Details

Related content

[ENCA: Featured tools for assessing natural capital and environmental valuation](#)

[Enabling a Natural Capital Approach \(ENCA\)](#)

[Valuing environmental impacts: guidelines for the use of value transfer](#)

[What nature can do for you](#)

[Impact assessment and options assessment calculator](#)

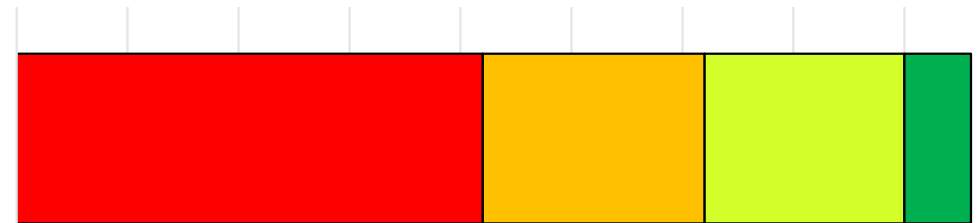
2023 - Are people familiar with ENCA?



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■ Completely disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Completely agree

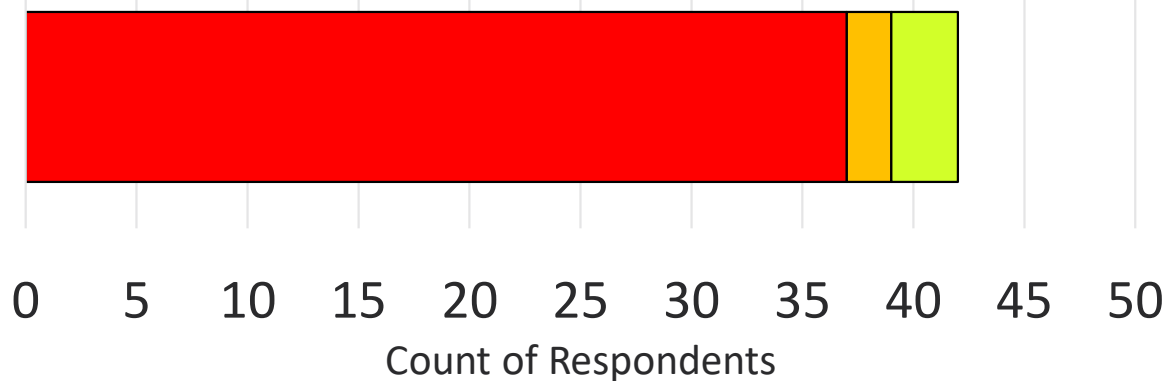
I am familiar with ENCA N=43



I feel able to apply the ENCA guidance N=43



I consider myself an expert on ENCA N=42



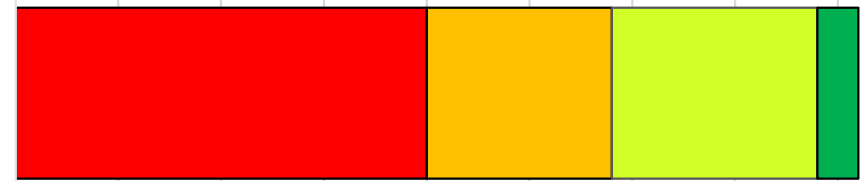
2025 - Are people familiar with ENCA?



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■ Completely disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Completely agree

I am familiar with ENCA, N=41



I feel able to apply the ENCA guidance, N=41



I consider myself an expert on ENCA, N=41



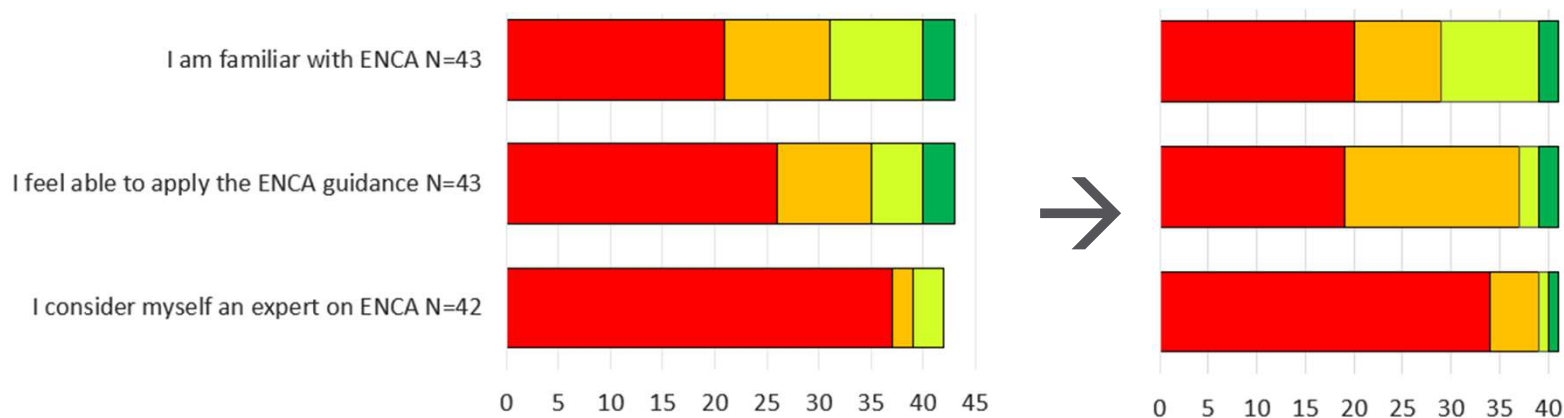
0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50

Count of Respondents

2023 → 2025



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- No significant shift in familiarity with ENCA

But do we need to make any changes?



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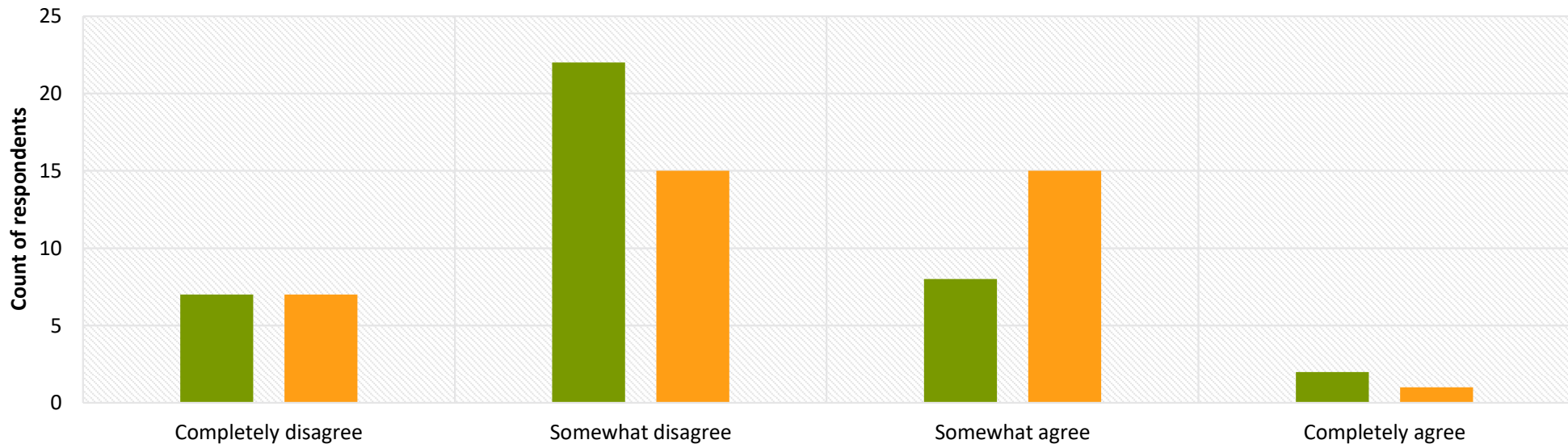
- If participants think that current policy development already takes good account of the environment, then why would they seek to work with new concepts or data.
- Need to check their views...

Do we need to do more to embed environmental considerations?



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Responses to “We already do enough to consider environmental issues in policy development”



Likert ratings selected for the statement "We already do enough to consider environmental issues in policy development". N=39 in 2023, N=38 in 2025

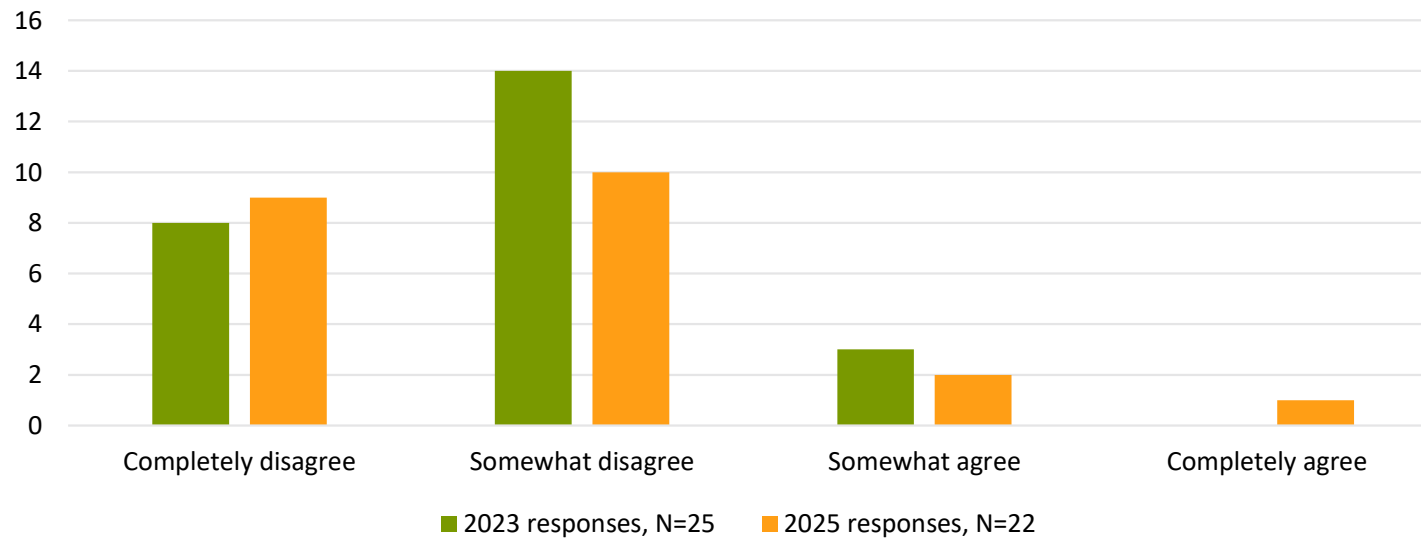
- In 2025, slight shift towards thinking we do enough?

Do we need to do more to embed environmental considerations?



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Responses to the statement “No changes are needed”

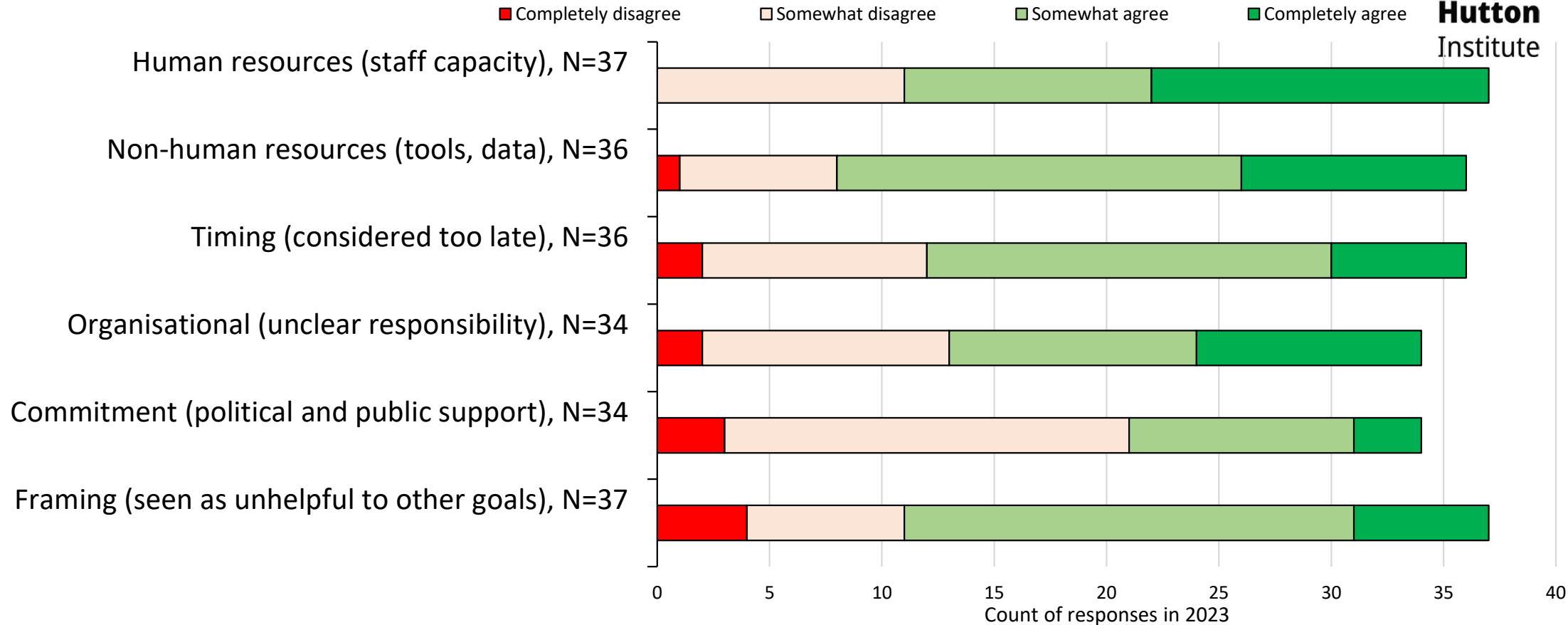


- But... this is pretty similar over the years: most think we do need to do more



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What types of challenges make it tricky? 2023

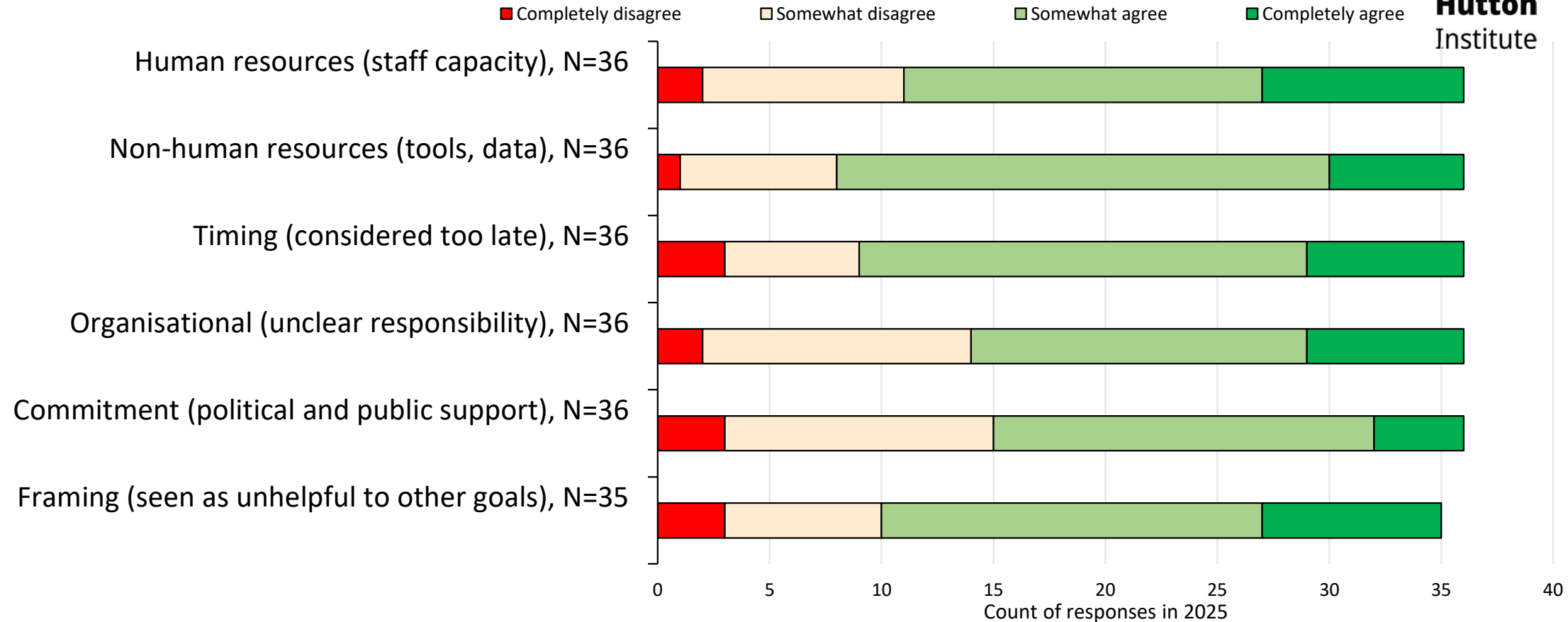


What challenges, if any, can make it challenging to embed environmental sustainability considerations during policy development?

What types of challenges make it tricky? 2025



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What challenges, if any, can make it challenging to embed environmental sustainability considerations during policy development?

Do we need to make any changes?



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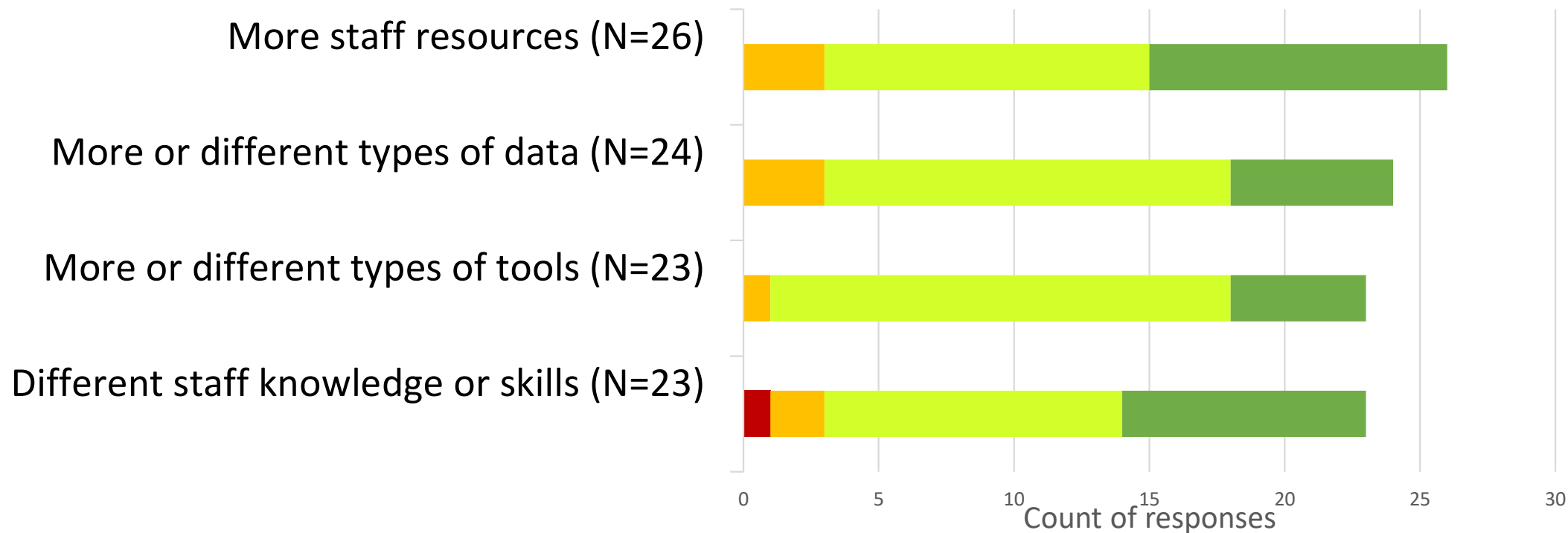
- Overall, it seems there are similar levels of support for doing more to embed environmental considerations into policy-making – which aligns with the aim of working with Natural Capital tools
- Staff capacity, timing in policy cycle, responsibilities and framing all seen as challenging by most, in both surveys – but in 2025 there is slightly strengthened agreement that lack of public or political support; whilst slightly less sense that staff capacity is a challenge.

2023 - What types of changes could help?



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■ Completely disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Completely agree



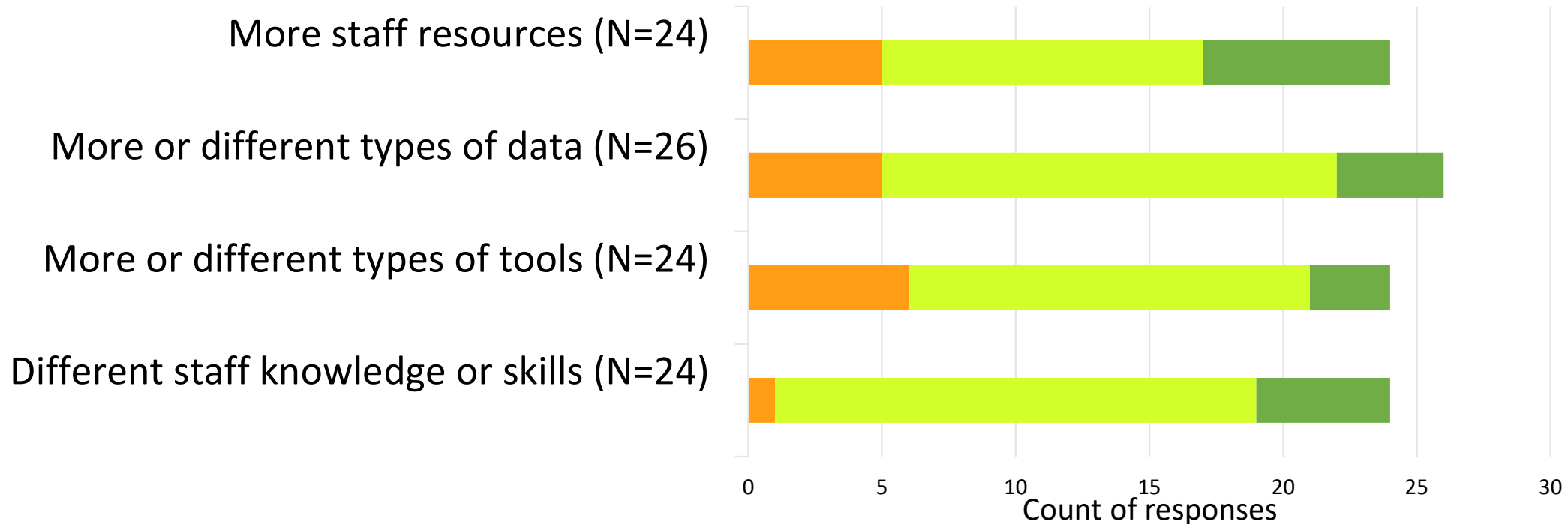
“Ideally, what types of changes or resources could help to embed consideration of sustainability issues in policy development?”

2025 - What types of changes could help?



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■ Completely disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Completely agree

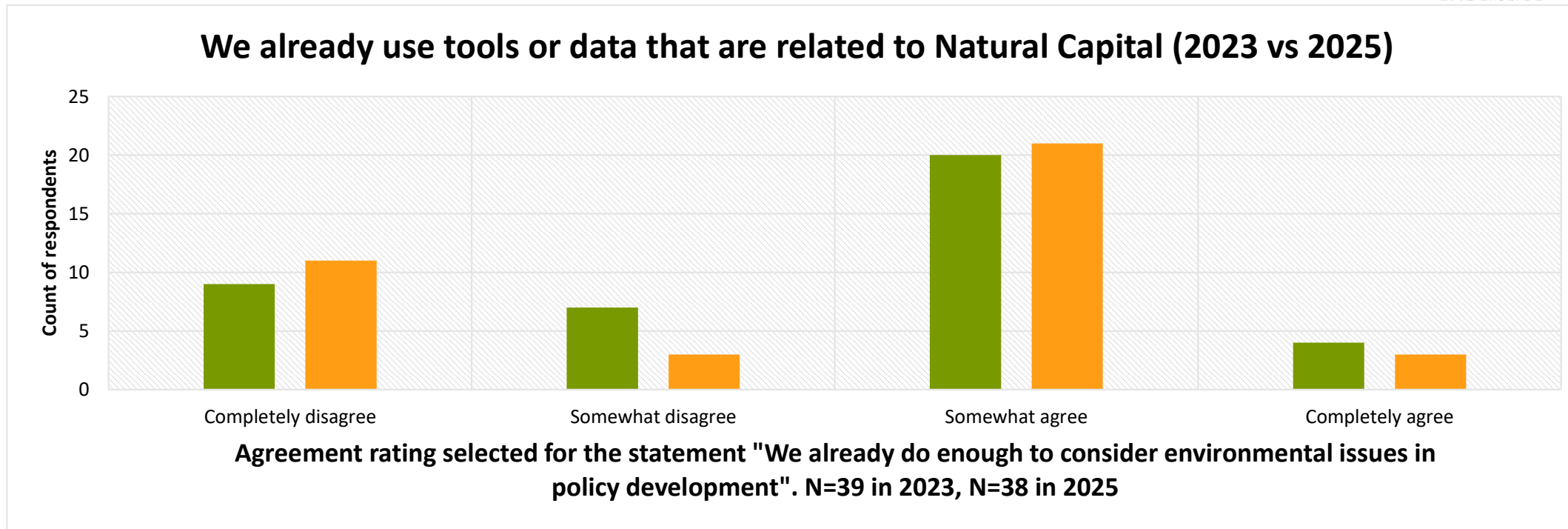


“Ideally, what types of changes or resources could help to embed consideration of sustainability issues in policy development?”

A bit more on tools & data



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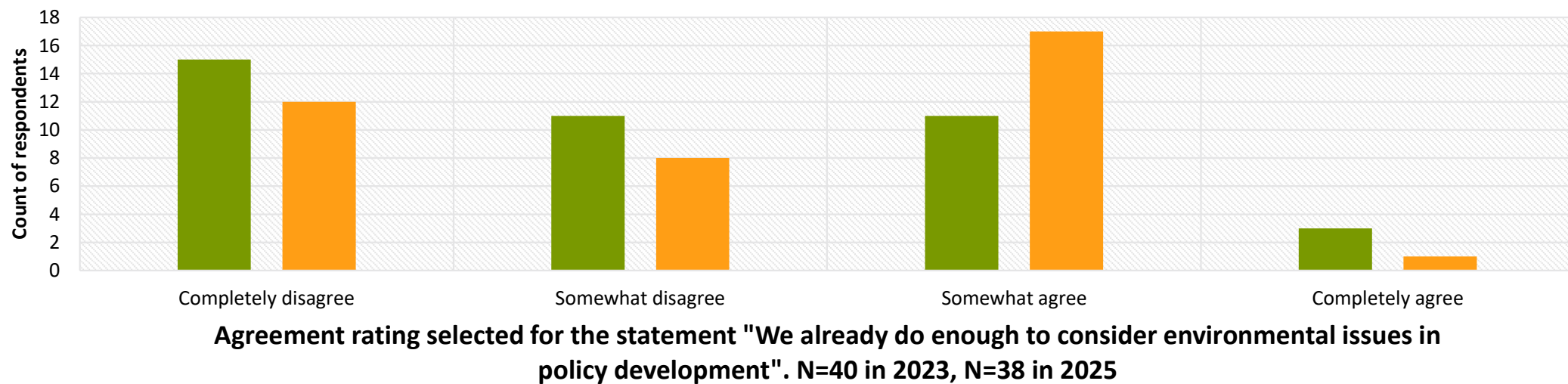
- No significant change

A bit more on tools & data



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We already use tools or data that are not strongly related to Natural Capital but can help ensure consideration of environmental issues (2023 vs 2025)



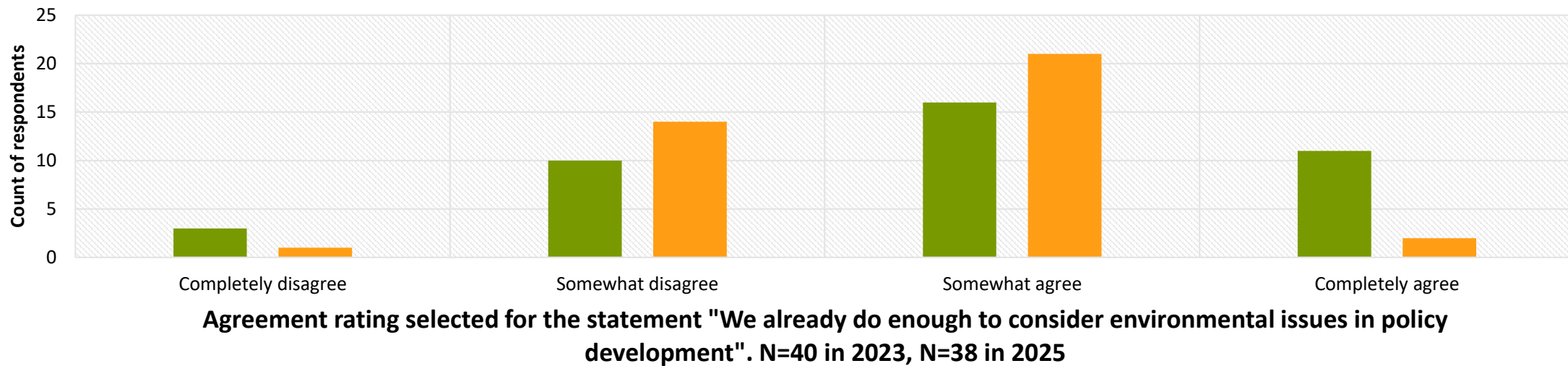
- Slight shift to agreeing non-NC data and tools are relevant and already in use

A bit more on tools & data



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We need more or different tools to help us consider environmental issues (2023 vs 2025)



- ...but still agree that we need more or changed tools

Other insights

- Ongoing discussions with some working on ARP
- Also show difficulty of finding practical ways to connect with ongoing policy development



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Summary



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Only slight shift in policy staff perceptions and familiarity with NC, from 2023 and 2025

- Shift is slow, perhaps as little “top-down” leadership perceived
- However, some effect of events, training and reports recalled

Reflections



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NC data & tools may help get nature properly taken into account...

- but we need to connect these with existing data & tools
- We cannot rely ‘just’ on data & tools – leadership, timing are also important



Looking forward



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More efforts needed as Scotland's nature continues to degrade

- More capacity-building e.g. on ENCA?
- More opportunity to embed in statutory targets?
- Different approaches will complement each other

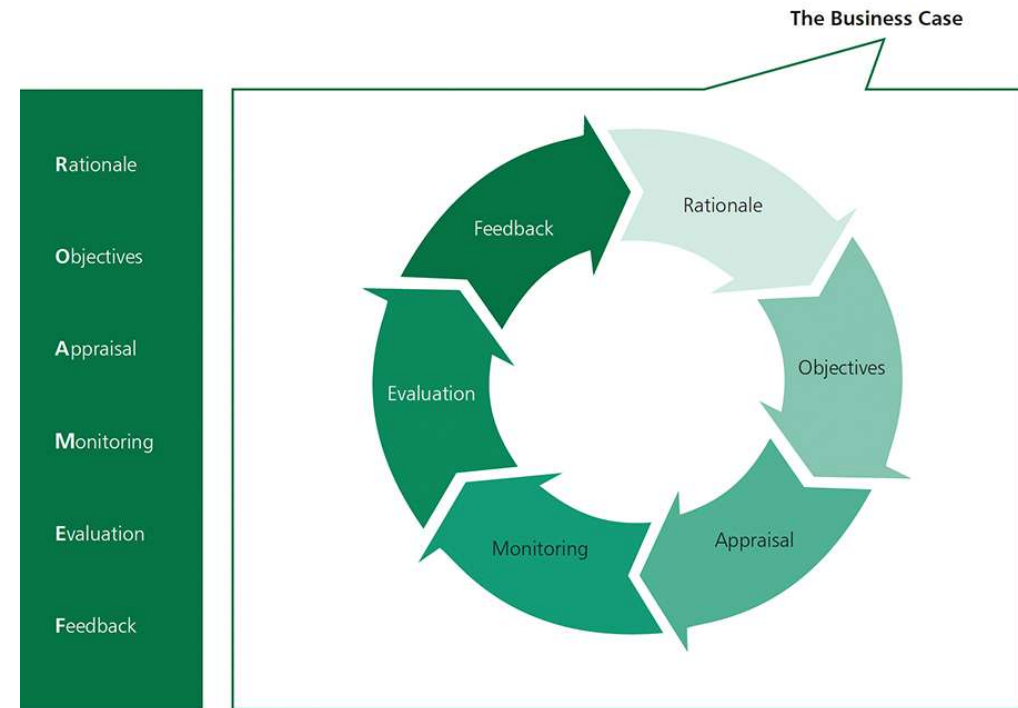


Looking forward

In parallel research, have been discussing NC with agricultural policy colleagues

- Communicate NC differently for different staff & roles?
- Specify how to link NC with policy cycle?

Outputs from this, and from cross-cutting discussion later in 2026 at www.hutton.ac.uk/project/galvanising-change-via-natural-capital



References



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Many thanks for your attention

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Many thanks to Scottish Government colleagues for construction discussions and input into research, supported by the 2022-2027 Strategic Research Programme for funding research into Natural Capital

