

Few human initiatives have received the near universal support enjoyed by ESG. But, the decisions made today will determine where the ultimate UK ESG outcome lies on the spectrum between wishful naivete and practical possibility.

Key Points:

- The MiFID II research funding mechanism is an existential threat to UK ESG objectives.
- There is an immense funding duration mismatch between long-term ESG goals and the current asset manager funding system.
- This exposes ESG outcomes to substantial market risk.
- Pension funds should be incentivized to use their extended duration and low research costs to underwrite long-term ESG objectives.
- Post-Brexit, the UK can craft a regulatory architecture that meets these challenges.

Post-Brexit, the UK must construct an independent financial regulatory framework that reflects the clear desire from market participants/societal stakeholders to establish the UK as the global leader in Green finance.

MiFID II poses an existential threat to these bold UK ESG ambitions.

MiFID II allowed asset managers two methods to pay for investment research (including ESG inputs). 1. Continue client funding, (from the asset owner but with greater manager transparency), or 2. Pay for it themselves via their P&L.

For a variety of reasons, most managers chose option 2 – despite the risks to their profitability. The authors of MiFID II clearly misunderstood the huge research cost asymmetry between asset owners (who paid historically) and asset managers. The cost to Asset Owners was small – several Basis Points - versus average equity returns ~700 Bps per annum. But, when research charges were transferred to the P&L of the asset manager it became their second largest cost, right behind staff compensation.

In response, P&L managers cut fundamental research budgets (averaging 50-70%) to maintain profitability. This was before the advent of significant ESG expenses, and, during a period of rising multi-asset class financial markets.

Most importantly, from a forward-looking ESG perspective, P&L funding made the availability of research to asset managers (including ESG) a function of their profitability. The impact was illustrated recently in graphic fashion.

In 1Q 2020, markets collapsed ~25% in response to Covid. This instantaneously reduced European manager AUM/revenues by 25% resulting in European manager pre-tax profits falling ~50%.

Had markets not recovered rapidly from the March 2020 lows, P&L managers would have been forced to cut research (and ESG) budgets drastically – from already depressed levels. P&L is a treacherous funding mechanism when markets decline. The lower markets go, the less research (and ESG/Stewardship inputs) P&L managers can access.

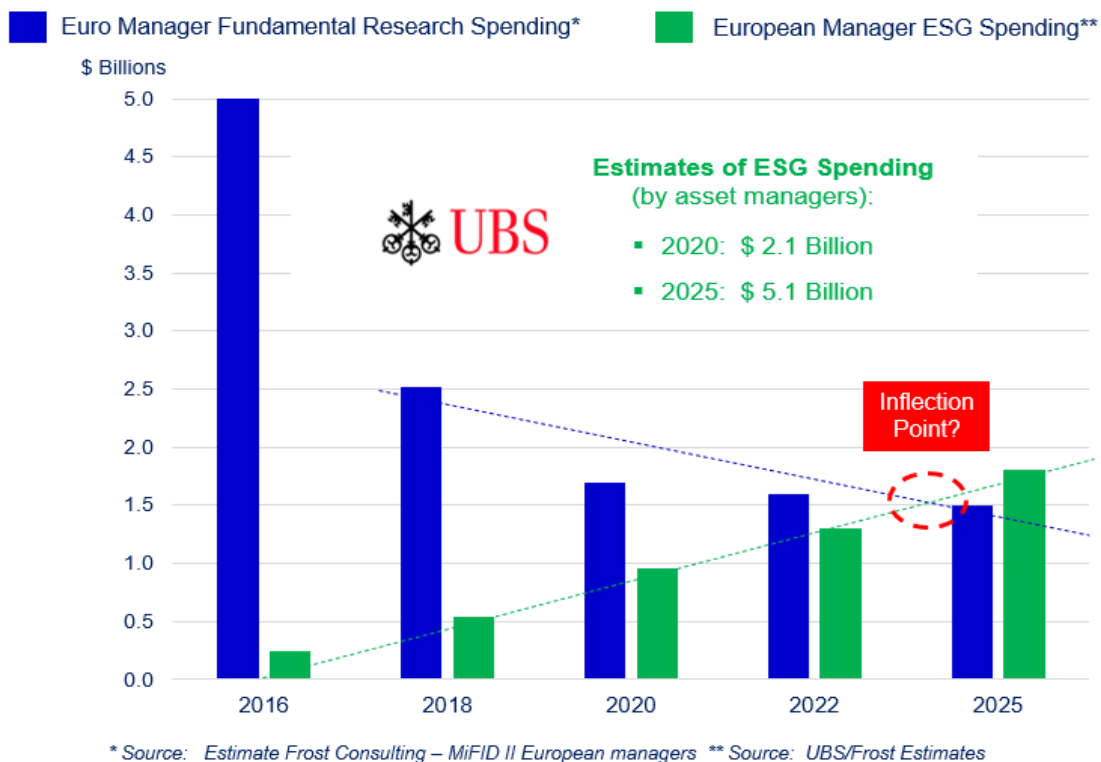
This is likely not in the best interest of asset owners. For pension funds, avoiding de minimus research charges of a handful of basis points makes little sense when the performance variance between funds that do well and those that do poorly is frequently measured in thousands of basis points.* (In the US, the SEC is aware of this, which explains their antipathy to the manager P&L model for funding research. In Europe, regulators are beginning to realize this - with the benefit of hindsight).

The MiFID II funding regime preceded the widespread adoption of ESG strategies. When MiFID II was being conceived, ESG at the current scale was not remotely visible on the horizon.

Flash forward to 2021: ESG AUM is growing rapidly, but so are ESG data, stewardship and regulation costs. UBS estimates managers spent \$2 billion on ESG inputs in 2020 potentially growing to \$5 billion by 2025.

European ESG spending may exceed fundamental research budgets before 2025. Both budgets now come from the same place – the manager’s P&L. The two budgets may soon begin to cannibalize one another.

RESEARCH VS. ESG SPENDING: EUROPE



Now, both fundamental research budgets, and long-term UK ESG objectives, are a function of short-term financial market direction – because they are tied to manager profitability.

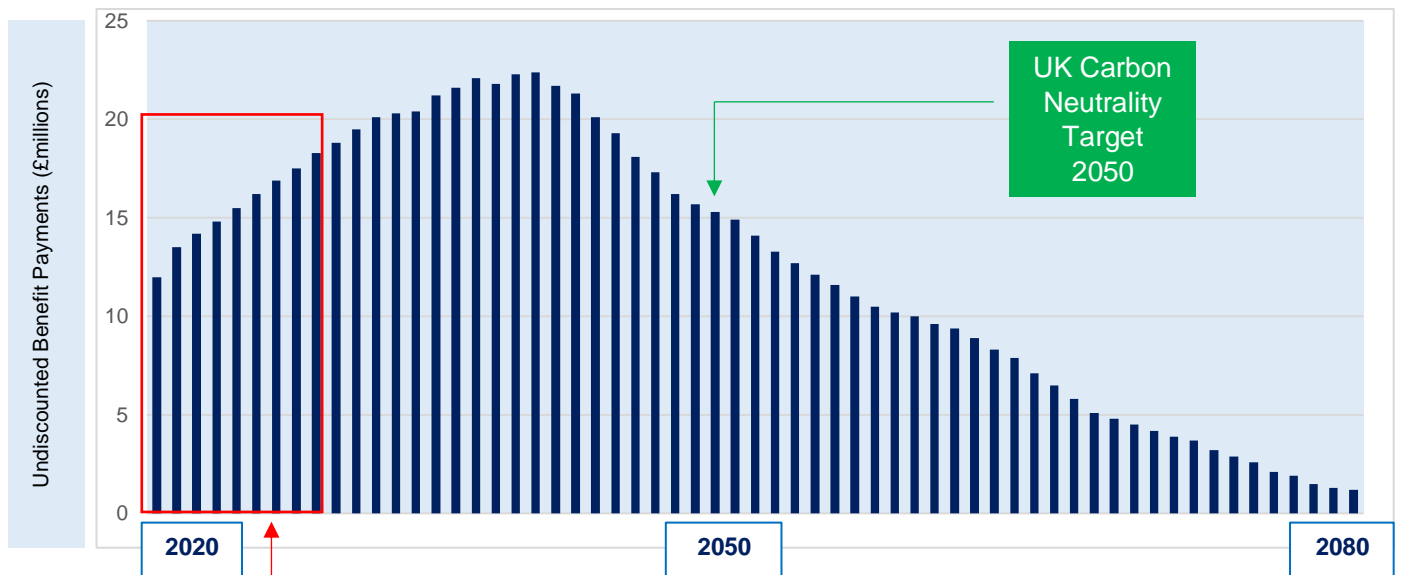
As long as there is an uninterrupted bull market between now and 2050, everything will be fine.

The Role of Pension Funds

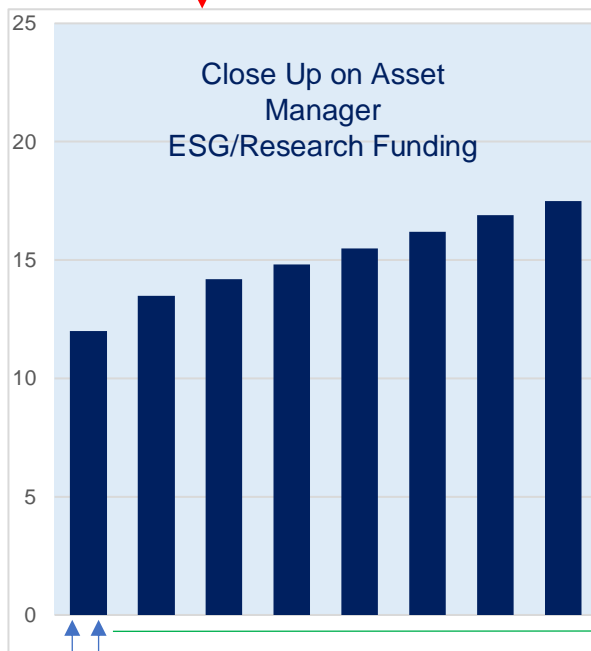
Pension funds have long-term liability profiles that align well with the timeframes required for the achievement of ESG objectives. However, asset managers, measured quarterly, and with annual profit targets, operate in a much more constrained timeframe.

The result is an immense funding duration mismatch between long-term ESG targets (UK Carbon neutrality in 2050) and the current funding regime – (manager ESG budgets set annually based on revenue determined *quarterly* – 30 years in advance of the ESG target).

UK Pension Funds – Long-Tailed Liabilities



Focus on short-term funding mechanism



How do we get to here... from here?

Key Risk:
If there's a Bear Market before 2050, all bets are off.

Asset Manager Revenue Re-Sets: Quarterly

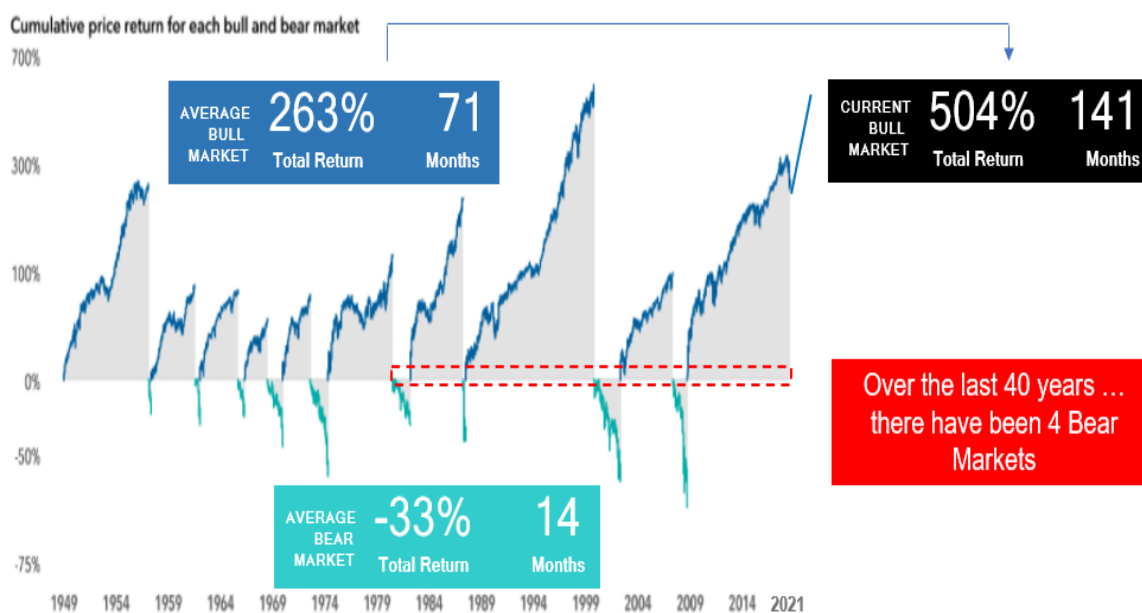
Asset Manager Research Budgets: Annual

But, if market volatility is possible over the next 30 years, we must hedge this risk or sacrifice ESG objectives, long before they can possibly be realized, thereby squandering ESG momentum which has taken decades to marshal.

The following chart plots bull and bear markets in US equities since 1949. Historically, the likelihood of an uninterrupted equity advance between now and 2050 seems low. This would require a ~40 year bull market (unprecedented), versus the average bull market duration of 6 years. (Over the last 40 years, there have been 4 Bear Markets).

EUROPEAN ESG OBJECTIVES: HELD HOSTAGE BY FINANCIAL MARKETS?

Equity Returns: Long-Term Perspective



Sources: Capital Group, RIMES, Standard & Poor's. As of 12/31/18. Bear markets are peak-to-trough price declines of 20% or more in the S&P 500. Bull markets are all other periods. Returns shown on a logarithmic scale.

In addition, European asset managers are far less resilient now than they were before the financial crisis. A 2008 magnitude market decline could eliminate manager profits (versus a decline of 40% in 2008)**. This could prove fatal for ESG objectives. No ESG budget could survive this unless asset managers became not for profit social enterprises.

One solution is to create incentives for pension funds, whose liability profiles mirror long-term ESG timeframes, to use their unique characteristics to ensure sustainability. Pension fund liabilities stretch decades into the future: consequently, they have a vested interest in the sustainability of the ESG/research ecosystem.

Pension Funds should be incentivized to use their long duration and low research costs to finance transparent, benchmarked, fund-level asset manager ESG budgets, thereby insulating long-term ESG objectives from short-term market volatility, in a way that asset managers, measured quarterly, simply cannot. (This will be the ongoing methodology in the US).

The cost to the pension funds would be extremely small. The benefits to society could be extremely large. Many pension beneficiaries might willingly forgo a small portion of short-term return in exchange for longer-term ESG objectives to be sustained.

ESG might achieve what MiFID II couldn't: Manager research transparency in exchange for durable asset owner research/ESG funding.

As the UK crafts its new regulatory environment, now is the time to have a transparent discussion on ESG funding.

Otherwise, UK sustainability, good intentions notwithstanding, could prove to be anything but.

**Source: Frost Consulting/EvercoreISI - <https://bit.ly/2MGIKTD>*

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