# UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

# MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 30 AUGUST 2023

**Present:** K Leydecker (Chair), A Burgos Aguilera, J Barrow, M Beers, J Bjorkvist, D Burslem, N Forsyth, B Lord, F Lovie, D Martin, A Price, H Sveinsdottir, M White, T Wolfe and H Crabb (Clerk).

**Apologies:** H Battu, H Gannicliffe, B Henderson, J Huttich, R Philp, T Potts, L Rattray, T Slaven and A Speight.

**In Attendance:** R Lyne, N Oren, C Osbeck, A Stuart

The Committee congratulated Fraser Lovie on his appointment to the role of Head of Sustainability.

1. **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 30 May 2023 were approved as an accurate record.

2. **MATTERS ARISING**

2.1 Table of Actions

The Committee received the Table of Actions arising from the previous meeting and noted the following:

2.1.1 THE Impact Rankings 2023

The Committee was advised that the League Tables Working Group had agreed that a submission should be prepared for the THE Impact Rankings 2024.

Expressions of interest were invited from members of the Committee to join the working group which would be established shortly to take forward the development of the institutional SDG Strategy. **Action: All**

2.1.2 Staff Sustainability Training

The Committee was advised that work was ongoing to develop the e-learning module for inclusion in staff induction material and noted that the timescale for completion had been extended due to competing priorities. The Committee anticipated receiving further updates.

**Action: FL**

2.1.3 Climate & Sustainability Assembly

The Committee was advised that an informal short-life working group would be established to discuss the development of a Biodiversity Policy & Action Plan.

2.1.4 East Grampian Coastal Partnership: Volunteering & Funding

The Committee welcomed the establishment of the staff volunteering ‘beach clean’ which was scheduled to take place on 6 September. The Committee was advised that a full risk assessment had been carried out and that around 20 volunteers were expected take part. The Committee welcomed the additional promotional activity which had been developed for hourly paid staff and noted that spaces had been reserved for this group (unfilled spaces would be made available to those on a waiting list).

2.1.5 Car Parking Charges

It was confirmed that any surplus from car parking charges will contribute towards sustainable travel initiatives, with the shuttle bus a top priority. The Committee was advised that consideration would be given to how awareness of the arrangement could be raised as part of forthcoming joint Estates/Finance discussions.

**Action: MB/MW**

**3. ANNUAL REVIEW OF TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The Committee considered the proposed revision to its Terms of Reference (remit, membership and composition), noting in particular (i) the ‘housekeeping’ updates, and (ii) the changes arising from the review of Executive Committees (particularly in relation to a reduction in the number of SMT members). The Committee noted that elections to fill the 2 Senate representative vacancies would take place in September.

The Committee welcomed the review’s endorsement of the Climate Assembly initiative as a mechanism for supporting wider community engagement in sustainability activities, particularly in view of the positive feedback which had been received from participants at the inaugural event. The Committee also noted the recommendation from the review to establish a clear action plan for the University’s sustainability objectives accompanied by an associated schedule of business and anticipated receiving a draft at the next meeting.

**Action: FL/Clerk**

The Committee noted and endorsed the proposed revisions to the Terms of Reference and membership and was advised that any further amendments arising from the implementation of the Internal Audit report’s findings and recommendations would be brought forward for approval at future meetings.

**4. SUSTAINABILITY RISK REGISTER**

The Committee received and considered the Environmental Sustainability section of the University’s Strategic Risk Register. The Committee noted that revisions had been made to the Register following the recent institutional risk workshop where 10 core risks had been adopted (including Environmental Sustainability Risk 1 (Funding & Finance)). The Committee was advised that the current register would continue to be reviewed at each meeting with a view to identifying which risk, or amalgamation of risk elements, represented the most acute institutional ‘environmental sustainability’ risk.

The Committee endorsed the following proposed amendments to the Risk Register:

* Risk 1 – amended to include reference to the new AUDE cost of net-zero calculator; and
* Risks 4 & 6 – inclusion of reference to the PWC audit recommendations on the need for a sustainability structure for Schools and Directorates.

The Committee considered and endorsed the proposed scoring of mitigated and unmitigated risks within the register. The Committee recognised the risks associated with Risk 1 (Funding & Finance) and noted the importance of ensuring that the scores continued to be kept under regular review at future meetings.

**5.** **ABERDEEN 2040 IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

The Committee received the Sustainability Commitments (16-19) section of the Aberdeen 2040 Implementation Plan and noted in particular the updates on activities which had been conducted up to July 2023 and actions proposed for 2023/24. The Committee welcomed the activities which had been completed and was advised that other initiatives were already underway and/or would commence shortly e.g. adaptation, design guide and off-setting. The Committee also welcomed the plans to hold a Sustainability Open Session, hosted by members of the Senior Management Team, to raise the profile of ongoing activities.

The Committee considered the suggestion that the feasibility of introducing an Undergraduate Degree in Sustainability be explored and was advised that proposals were already being considered in this regard. The Committee also noted that recent market research (undertaken in relation to the introduction of new programmes within the Schools of Geosciences and Biological Sciences) would be available to inform the ongoing discussions and that benchmarking activities to identify best practice elsewhere within the sector were planned as part of the ongoing review and promotion of sustainability content. It was agreed that further discussions to explore the possibility of implementing additional sustainability options and/or modules to existing degrees would take place in liaison with the Students’ Association.

**Action: JB/TP/AUSA representatives**

The Committee agreed to endorse the proposed updates to the Aberdeen 2040 implementation plan subject to the following amendment:

* Commitment 16 (action 1.2) – revise the current text to reflect the progress made to date and future activities planned in relation to ‘harnessing student activism’ (with less focus on the establishment of a Green Office).

**6. INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT**

The Committee received and noted the Internal Audit Report (Sustainability 2022/23) which had been conducted by PricewaterhouseCooper. The Committee also noted the proposed management responses to the findings and was advised that the report would be considered in more detail at the forthcoming Audit & Risk Committee meeting.

The Committee was advised that 6 findings had been reported (3 medium, 2 low and 1 advisory) to enhance the institutional approach to sustainability:

* Establishment of a standing operational group reporting to the Committee to ensure that progress on sustainability targets and initiatives is routinely monitored and reported;
* Review resource requirements for waste and travel to ensure adequate resource is in place to cover strategic and operational requirements related to sustainability and achieving net zero;
* Enhance awareness of net zero targets to support achievement i.e. agree long-term and interim net zero targets for Scopes 1,2 and 3 emissions and clearly communicate this to key stakeholders and ensure the net zero implementation plan includes clear SMART targets;
* Maximise opportunities to ensure that sustainability is embedded within the day-to-day operations of academic Schools, including considering developing sustainability action plans;
* Enhance contract management processes to ensure supplier progress in relation to their emissions reduction is routinely reported following appointment;
* Establishment of a standing group to formally discuss key issues, opportunities and risks related to ESG on a periodic basis.

In discussing the findings arising from the report, the Committee noted that some recommendations had already been actioned or were underway, including (i) the review of the Committee’s composition, and (ii) identifying potential University-wide engagement activities, particularly within Schools and Professional Services Directorates. The Committee was also advised that a standing operational sub-committee of the Sustainable Development Committee would be convened and would provide commentary on relevant sustainability-related trends and data to future meetings.

The Committee welcomed the areas of good practice which had been highlighted within the report, including (i) clear vision for sustainability, (ii) the governance structure, (iii) the focus on the UNSDGs, (iv) student training, (v) positive staff and student engagement with the sustainability agenda, and (vi) the Power BI Dashboard for reporting energy-related emissions,

The Committee welcomed the findings and recommendations arising from the Internal Audit process, commended the progress which had been made to date and anticipated receiving further updates on their implementation.

**Action: FL**

**7. LIVING & WORKING SUSTAINABLY**

7.1 The Sustainable Campus

The Committee received a presentation from Beth Lord and Nir Oren, representatives of the recent International Leadership Development Programme (ILDP) cohort, outlining the key findings from the project entitled “The Sustainable Campus: Embedding Sustainability Across our Institution”.

The Committee noted that the project had identified the following key principles, each underpinned by a series of recommended actions, criteria and KPIs to support their implementation:

* Set direction by increasing understanding of the urgency of the issue and the responsibilities of all individuals and teams;
* Engage commitment from staff in all Schools and Directorates; and
* Support teams to adapt to the complexity of a rapidly changing global situation and how it affects and interacts with other university priorities.

The Committee welcomed the recommendations arising from the project and noted their alignment with other discussions taking place in sustainability-related fora, particularly the Net Zero Working Group.

The importance of ensuring that staff and student engagement with, and enthusiasm for, sustainability-related matters was embedded across the University was highlighted, and the challenges encountered in this regard to date were noted. It was suggested that the planned Open Session provided a valuable opportunity to raise the profile of initiatives and indicate the strategic commitment to achieving the institutional sustainability objectives. The need to showcase the benefits of adopting a sustainable approach to all aspects of University activities was highlighted and the ongoing work to develop a Power BI dashboard to provide meaningful data, evidence and reports was noted in this regard.

It was also suggested that benefits could be derived from developing an effective communication strategy to harness staff/student enthusiasm and operationalise behaviour change in relation to sustainability matters beyond the planned Open Session and using a variety of media, including the Ezine and Yammer. The Committee was also advised that consideration would be given to how sustainability could be embedded within the annual School/Directorate planning process.

Thanks were extended to the ILDP team which had completed the project and the broad findings and recommendations were endorsed by the Committee.

**8. EDUCATION UPDATE**

8.1Update from Dean (Education)

The Committee received a presentation outlining the revised 6 draft Graduate Attributes which had been developed following the recent review:

* Working with Others
* Active Citizenship
* Managing Yourself
* Enterprise & Innovation
* Analytical Skills
* Career Readiness

The Committee welcomed in particular the focus on sustainability within the Active Citizenship attribute.

The Committee was advised that a new functionality/skills framework within the Career Connect system (‘MySkills’) would be launched at the start of Session 2023/24 to enable students to capture details of, and reflect upon, new skills developed within and outwith their academic studies (including extra-curricular activities, elected representative roles etc.). Students will also be able to enhance their employability skills by undertaking a digital skills assessment and creating a ‘Career Passport’. In welcoming the implementation of the new system, the Committee highlighted the importance of (i) raising awareness of the benefits of the system amongst staff and students, and (ii) ensuring that workload impacts on both groups were mitigated as far as possible.

8.2Update from AUSA

The Committee welcomed Ainhoa Burgo Aguilera to her first meeting of the committee.

The Committee received and noted the update on sustainability activities which had been undertaken by AUSA since the previous meeting.

The Committee welcomed the progress which had been made including (i) the achievement of ‘Excellent’ status in the NUS Green Impact 2022/23 ranking, (ii) the award of a £13K grant to support and expand sustainable food and active travel initiatives, (iii) ongoing work in relation to student bus travel options and prices, (iv) plans for the Active Travel Challenge, (v) the engagement with the 20-minute neighbourhood initiative, (vi) waste management plans, (vii) plans for a Welcome Week Sustainability Market and the Fayre, (viii) engagement with the Hedgehog-Friendly Campus initiative, (ix) ongoing support for students during the cost-of-living crisis, including swapshop collections and cooking workshops, (xi) plans for a Zero Waste shop, and (xii) plans for Climate Week North-East and Envirolution.

The Committee was advised that the activities being undertaken by AUSA would be included in the UNSDG and other annual institutional reports on an ongoing basis.

**9.** **NET ZERO UPDATE**

9.1 Update on Net Zero 2040 Journey

The Committee received and noted the update on the progress being made within various strands of Net Zero activity. The Committee welcomed the progress made to date by the Net Zero Working Group in developing long-term decarbonisation pathways for emission sources and activities and was advised that target deadlines for achieving the activities detailed within the pathways, alongside estimating their impact on the institutional emissions profile, would be established.

The Committee noted the “Cost of Net Zero Calculator” took which had been developed by AUDE, EAUC and BUFDG to support institutions in developing a strategic-level financial plan for achieving Net Zero. The Committee was advised that the project cost for the Higher Education sector to achieve net zero had been calculated at £37.1billion. The University’s estimated cost (based on 2021/22 emissions data) had been calculated at £112.45M (of which direct costs are over £70.61M). The Committee noted the advantages and disadvantages associated with the tool and was advised that adjustments would be made to enable the production of financial projections which better reflected local conditions and would provide the basis for future discussions.

The Committee was advised that the process of drafting the institutional Public Bodies Climate Change Duty Report 2022/23 had begun. The Committee noted that reporting requirements and expectations had increased, including an enhanced focus on Scope 3 emissions sources. The Committee also noted the changes which had been made to some emissions factors, particularly in relation to their impact on the overall outcomes e.g. an increase in conversion factors of 7% for grid electricity, 5% for steam and between 11% and 35% for flights.

The Committee noted that the inclusion of emissions from student travel to study for the first time would significantly increase reported Scope 3 emissions. The Committee was advised that despite an overall reduction in student numbers and a reduction in the total distance travelled, emissions from student travel had increased by 33.15% due to the changes in the emissions factors associated with flight travel (due to the 3-year lag in calculations). The Committee was advised that when published, the data would also include a calculation based on the previous emissions factors for comparative purposes. The Committee noted that the data would be kept under review by the new operational sub-committee and anticipated receiving further progress updates as appropriate at future meetings.

The importance of effective communication around the progress that has been made in reducing travel was noted and it was agreed that an article showcasing various strands of sustainability activity would be submitted to the Ezine. The Committee welcomed the inclusion of the Student Travel to Study tool in the EAUC annual conference and the positive feedback it had received within the sector at national and international levels and suggested that award applications be explored.

**Action: FL**

The Committee welcomed the progress made in the development of the Sustainability Power BI Dashboard and the ongoing activities in relation to sustainability-related projects, including the Net Zero Heat Centre upgrades programme, Hillhead District Heating Project and the options appraisal being undertaken by the Sustainable Heating Programme Board.

**10. RESEARCH UPDATE**

10.1 Update from Interdisciplinary Centres

The Committee received and noted the report on sustainability-related activities within the Interdisciplinary Centres since the previous meeting.

The Committee welcomed the wide range of activities being undertaken, including (i) the grants awarded within the themes of Environment and Biodiversity and/or Energy Transition, (ii) the major grant proposals which had been submitted to external funders, including NERC, UKRI and the Leverhulme Trust, (iii) ongoing recruitment within the Centres (including the advertisement for 3 Interdisciplinary Fellows in Energy Transition), (iv) preparations for COP28 UAE, and (v) internal and external stakeholder engagement events. The Committee agreed that the report should be circulated to all Heads of School for information.

**Action: Clerk**

It was suggested that consideration be given to all 5 Interdisciplinary Challenge areas producing a similar report to showcase their activities and progress.

**Action: NF/DB**

The Committee noted the successful conclusion of the work which had been undertaken following the £100K award in Session 2022/23 from NERC to support cross-disciplinary research for Discovery Science and welcomed the establishment of an Interdisciplinary Challenges Open Sessions Day to facilitate cross-disciplinary discussions, explore new ideas and enable informal networking.

**11. AOB**

The Committee was advised that a series of Aberdeen Climate Actions Cafes was planned and that further details about the events would be circulated via email outwith the meeting.

**Action: AP**

**12. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Sustainable Development Committee will be held on Monday 13 November 2023 at 2.05pm – 3.55pm via Microsoft Teams.