# UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

# MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 13 NOVEMBER 2023

**Present:** K Leydecker (Chair), H Battu (agenda items 1-5), A Burgos Aguilera, J Barrow, M Beers, D Burslem, H Gannicliffe, B Henderson, J Huttich, F Lovie, D Martin, S Piertney, L Rattray, T Potts (from agenda item 5), A Price, T Slaven (agenda items 1-8), H Sveinsdottir, M White (agenda items 1-5), U Witte, and H Crabb (Clerk).

**Apologies:** B Lord, C Osbeck, R Philp

**In Attendance:** P Edwards (agenda item 9), R Lyne, A Stuart, T Wolfe

The Committee welcomed Ursula Witte to her first meeting as Senate representative.

1. **MINUTES**

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

2. **MATTERS ARISING**

2.1 Table of Actions

The Committee received the Table of Actions (SDC20231113.2) arising from the previous meeting and noted the following:

2.1.1 Staff Sustainability Training

The Committee was advised that work had reached an advanced stage to develop the e-learning module for inclusion in staff induction material and noted that the timescale for completion had been extended to early 2024 due to competing priorities. The Committee anticipated receiving further updates.

**Action: FL**

2.1.2 Car Parking Charges

The Committee was advised that discussions would take place outwith the meeting and anticipated receiving further updates.

**Action: MB/MW**

2.1.3 Sustainability Action Plan

The Committee was advised that the internal audit had recommended that a clear action plan be established to underpin the achievement of the University’s sustainability objectives. The Committee noted that a draft Schedule of Business, which included reference to the action plan, would be considered as a separate agenda item.

2.1.4 Sustainability Modules/Degree Options

The Committee was advised that some course options were already available to all undergraduate students e.g. the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Our World, and the Sustainability Sixth Century Course. The Committee was also advised that the new degree model proposed by the School of Geosciences had been paused, but that discussions were ongoing in relation to the feasibility of establishing a cross-School sustainability degree or additional modules.

The Committee welcomed the planned review of sustainability in the curriculum which will launch in Session 2023/24 to explore possible degree structures, options and innovations drawing on best practice from across the sector.

2.1.5 Student Travel to Study Tool

The Committee welcomed the application which had been submitted to the Northern Star Awards to recognise the Student Travel to Study Tool and was advised that an application would be presented to the Green Gown Awards 2024.

2.1.6 Interdisciplinary Centre Update

The Committee was advised that the action had been completed.

**3. SCHEDULE OF BUSINESS SESSION 2023/24**

3.1 The Committee welcomed the proposed Schedule of Business for Session 2023/24 (SDC20231113.3) and agreed to endorse it, subject to including the outcomes of the QS World University Rankings on the February 2024 agenda.

**Action: Clerk**

3.2 Identifying Future Discussion Topics

The Committee identified the following priority Strategic Discussion Topics for inclusion on future agendas:

* Procurement/Circular Economy;
* Staff /Student Engagement & Communication Activities;
* EV Charging Infrastructure;
* Sustainability Education (internal and external delivery); and
* Sustainability Risk Register/Financial Sustainability (agreed as topic for February 2024 meeting, see agenda item 4).

**Action: Clerk**

**4. SUSTAINABILITY RISK REGISTER**

The Committee received and considered the Environmental Sustainability section of the University’s Strategic Risk Register (SDC20231113.4). The Committee welcomed the proposed amendments to Risk 1 (to highlight the need for the integration of net-zero projects into wider project prioritisation), Risk 2 (inclusion of update on training module and the role of assemblies), and Risk 4 (to reflect new emissions boundaries for 2023 and related adjustments to emissions reporting). The Committee was advised that no changes to risk scoring had been proposed, although the financial challenges outlined in Risk 1 were noted in the context of the recent announcements relating to the institutional financial position.

In discussion, the Committee anticipated that the current institutional financial challenges could present an opportunity to embed more efficient and sustainable ways of working. However, the potential risks associated with the impact on broader institutional activities associated with (i) the failure to meet sustainability targets, and (ii) the allocation of limited financial resources to sustainability initiatives to the detriment of other core activities, was noted. It was also suggested that in the long-term, consideration could be given to ‘ring-fencing’ savings derived from sustainability initiatives for investment in additional sustainability-related activities.

Consideration was given to whether the mitigated scores associated with Risk 1 should be raised to 4 (Likelihood) and 4 (Impact). It was agreed that the current scoring of 4 (Likelihood) and 3 (Impact) should be maintained in view of the planned development of a financial recovery plan and the long-term nature of several of the sustainability-related activities. The Committee anticipated that the publication of the Net Zero action plan would also support in determining the most appropriate risk scores.

The Committee agreed to endorse the Risk Register, subject to a further review of the Risk 1 mitigations being conducted with a view to clarifying whether each seeks to mitigate (i) risk consequences, and/or (ii) funding/financial constraints.

**Action: FL/MW**

The Committee agree that the Strategic Discussion Topic for the February 2024 meeting would be the Sustainability Risk Register/Financial Sustainability.

**Action: Clerk**

**5.** **LIVING & WORKING SUSTAINABLY**

5.1 Review of Guiding Principles of Sustainable Business Travel

The Committee received and considered the findings and recommendations arising from the review of the Guiding Principles of Sustainable Business Travel & Travel Hierarchy (SDC20231113.5.

The Committee welcomed the progress made towards achieving the Aberdeen 2040 interim target for 2025 of 2,500 tCO2e/40% reduction in business travel-related emissions from the pre-pandemic baseline in 2018/19. The Committee was advised that the emissions level for 2022/23 was 2,594 tCO2e, which represented a 37.7% reduction on 2018/19 levels. The Committee noted that the emissions factors for air travel had risen significantly for most categories in air travel in 2022/23 and that had the 2021/22 equivalent factors been used in the emissions calculation, the estimated total for 2022/23 would have been 2,400 tCO2e (i.e. ahead of the 2025 target).

The Committee also welcomed the significant reduction in air travel in 2022/23 (11.1 million passenger kilometres) compared to 2018/19 (19.9 million), representing a 44.2% reduction in the total distance travelled by air.

The challenges associated with analysing the data, particularly the manual processes which were required to extract the relevant information, were recognised. The Committee noted the recent change to the University’s travel provider and the anticipation that future data collection and analysis may be enhanced as a result.

The Committee recognised the low level of participation in the consultation exercise which had been undertaken with staff to inform the review but welcomed the detailed feedback which had been received from those who responded. The Committee noted that the ethos underpinning the Guiding Principles (a framework within which members of staff can consider whether travel is appropriate and if so, the most sustainable way in which to undertake their journey) was recognised and broadly welcomed by respondents, although some comments had been received indicating a preference that a stronger message be adopted by the University to discourage business travel. Respondents (including those in favour of such a stronger approach) recognised the challenges and impacts which this could have upon both individuals and the University. The Committee also noted the suggestions in relation to business travel and other sustainability matters which had been submitted and was advised that they would be considered by the relevant teams across the University.

In welcoming the early indicators of positive progress towards reducing the institutional carbon emissions arising from business travel, the Committee agreed to endorse the proposal that the current Guiding Principles of Sustainable Business Travel & Travel Hierarchy are retained within the suite of institutional sustainability policies and are reviewed again in November 2024.

5.2 Update from Dean for Environmental Sustainability

The Committee received an update from the Dean for Environmental Sustainability. The Committee welcomed the level of engagement with, and enthusiasm for, the recent Climate Assembly which had focused on Green Laboratories. The Committee noted that a detailed report would be published in early 2024 and was advised that positive discussions had taken place with a view to encouraging local ownership of enhancing sustainability within the laboratory environment. The Committee also welcomed discussions which had taken place with senior members of Technical staff to identify potential utilities reductions e.g. low temperature freezers.

The Committee was advised that the Assemblies programme would be paused for the next semester to facilitate the implementation of the findings and recommendations arising from both 2023 events (Becoming A Nature Positive University and Green Laboratories).

The Committee welcomed the enthusiasm for sustainability initiatives and student interest in sustainability-related subjects which had been expressed to the Dean during his recent visit to the AFG campus in Qatar.

The Committee also noted the recent publication of 2 reports outlining current scientific thinking in relation to sustainability matters:

* Earth Beyond Six of the Nine Planetary Boundaries; and
* UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Stocktake Report 2023.

5.3 Sustainable Development Goals Update

5.3.1 THE Impact Rankings 2024 Submission

The Committee was advised that the deadline for submissions to the THE Impact Ranking deadline had passed, but an extension had been granted (22 November) due to the unexpected absence of a key staff member. The Committee welcomed the ongoing activities being undertaken by the Working Group to support the development of the institutional submission.

5.3.2 Annual Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022/23

The Committee commended the proposed content, layout and presentation of the draft Annual Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022/23 (SDC20231113.7.2). The Committee requested the development of an extensive communication plan to share the Report as widely as possible to both internal and external audiences.

**Action: FL/HS**

5.3.3 Higher Education Strategic Planners Association (HESPA) Report: Integrating Climate Into Strategy & Planning in Universities

The Committee received and considered the HESPA Report (SDC20231113.8) which had been developed in collaboration with SUMS Consulting and examined the sector’s practice around integrating climate change and carbon emissions into university strategy and planning. The Committee noted that the report also aimed to promote best practice (internal and external to higher education) in relation to the successful integration of climate and carbon as key strategic drivers. The Committee was advised that other strands of sustainability, e.g. nature, biodiversity, social/economic sustainability and governance had been considered out of scope in producing the report.

The Committee considered the University’s position in relation to the recommendations outlined in the report and noted in particular the importance of (i) embedding sustainability across all institutional activities, (ii) raising awareness of sustainability matters and University/AUSA activities across staff, student and external audiences, and (iii) ensuring the breadth and depth of understanding of sustainability to support full integration of sustainability across the institution.

The Committee welcomed the opportunity provided by the paper to benchmark current and sector-wide best practice.

**6. NET ZERO UPDATE**

6.1 Update on Net Zero 2040 Journey

The Committee welcomed the activities undertaken and progress made to date (SDC20231113.9). The Committee was advised that the Net Zero Targets and Strategies Working Group was continuing to make good progress and anticipated receiving a draft strategy document in early 2024.

The Committee also noted the sector-wide activities in relation to developing tools to measure student travel to study (relocation) emissions and welcomed Estrid Jonsson’s nomination in the ‘Rising Star’ category of the 2024 Northern Star Business Awards and the EAUC recommendation that she be nominated in the next Green Gown Awards cycle in recognition of the development work undertaken during her internship. Consideration will be given to whether the tool could be eligible for inclusion in the REF as a research impact case study.

The Committee noted that the proposed ‘Designing for a Net Zero Future’ InternPlus project to develop new sustainability and net zero content for the Estates Design Guide had been paused due to the scheme being placed on hold in light of the institutional financial position. Further consideration will be given to identifying other funding opportunities and/or internal programmes which could enable the work to proceed and provide the students with the opportunity to participate.

The Committee welcomed the involvement of the Sustainability team with the ‘Computational Net Zero & Biodiversity’ Interest Group established within the School of Natural & Computing Science and noted that two final year students would embark upon a project to develop computer programmes to (i) improve the home/UK student travel data used by the student relocation tool by calculating distance travelled and related emissions based on postcode (instead of country capital), and (ii) calculate distance travelled and emissions by international students based on their submitted home addresses.

6.2 Public Bodies Climate Change Duties Submission 2022/23

The Committee received and considered the institutional Public Bodies Climate Change Duties Submission 2022/23 (SDC20231113.10). The Committee was advised that the total outlined in the final emissions profile for 2022/23 (64,442 tCO2e), reflected the inclusion of previously unreported sources of emissions in line with recognised best practice. The Committee noted that this represented an increase on the total of 50,463 tCO2e reported in 2021/22, primarily due to the inclusion of 3 new emissions categories in the profile:

* Student relocation – 14,463 tCO2e
* Well-to-tank - 2,556 tCO2e
* Staff commuting - 2,133 tCO2e

The Committee was advised that a like-for-like comparison of emissions against the 2021/22 highlighted a 10.27% reduction in emissions year-on-year, primarily due to reductions in emissions relating to procurement spend (supply chain), natural gas use and steam emissions. The Committee also noted other relevant factors which had impacted on the emissions profile, including (i) the Combined Heat & Power engine being offline for a period of time, (ii) the inclusion of the first full-year of travel data post-pandemic, and (iii) significant adjustments in emissions factors.

The Committee agreed to endorse the proposed report and recommended that the final version be presented to the Senior Management Team for approval prior to submission. The Committee highlighted the importance of ensuring that a robust communication strategy was developed to accompany the publication of the submission.

**Action: FL**

**7. EDUCATION UPDATE**

7.1Update from Dean (Education)

The Committee was advised that positive and constructive feedback had been received from the University Education Committee and Senate on the proposed revisions to the Graduate Attributes Framework. The Committee noted that a revised document would be presented through the committee structure for endorsement, and ultimately to Senate for approval, in early 2024.

7.2Update from AUSA

The Committee received and noted the update on sustainability activities (SDC20231113.12) which had been undertaken by AUSA since the previous meeting.

The Committee welcomed the progress which had been made including (i) ongoing biodiversity work, particularly as part of the network of local community gardens, (ii) the community café and zero waste shop, (iii) Climate Week North East activities, particularly the second hand market, the launch of the new carbon literacy course, film screening, litter-pick and zero-waste challenge, and (iv) the success of sustainability themed stalls during BeWell and Inclusion Weeks.

**8. RESEARCH UPDATE**

8.1 Update from Interdisciplinary Centres

The Committee received and noted the report on sustainability-related activities within the Interdisciplinary Centres (SDC20231113.13) since the previous meeting.

The Committee welcomed the wide range of activities being undertaken, including (i) the successful funding bids, particularly the £10.6M Centre for Doctoral Training in artificial intelligence award to promote sustainable agriculture in partnership with Lincoln, Strathclyde and Queens University Belfast, (ii) the list of submitted grant proposals and bids which were in development, (iii) the process to appoint 3 Interdisciplinary Fellows in Energy Transition, (iv) preparations for COP 28 (UAE), and (v) sustainability-related events.

**9. STRATEGIC DISCUSSION TOPIC – RE-IMAGINING OUR CAMPUSES PROJECT**

The Committee received a presentation from Professor Pete Edwards, Vice-Principal (Regional Engagement) outlining progress made to date and future plans for the Re-Imagining our Campuses project.

The Committee noted the structures which had been put in place to support the delivery of the project and was advised that the Dean for Environmental Sustainability had been appointed Chair of the Net Zero Sub-Group. All Committee members were invited to participate in the ongoing consultation process by sending comments and feedback directly to the Dean for consideration.

**Action: All**

**10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Sustainable Development Committee will be held on Tuesday 24 February 2024 at 10.05am via Microsoft Teams.