UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 25 MAY 2022

**Present:** K Leydecker (Chair), J Bjorkqvist, M Campbell, N Degama, P Edwards, B Henderson, J Huttich, A Koster, R Philp, C Torres-Baragan (vice A Koster), F Lovie, T Potts, A Price, L Rattray, R Slater, H Sveinsdottir, R Taylor, N Vargesson, and J Whitfield (Minutes).

**Apologies:** D Burslem, H Crabb (Clerk), D Dyker, J Fernandes, H Gannicliffe, P McNaull, K Sadler, T Slaven, A Speight and Y Tanino.

**In Attendance:** F Smith (agenda item 4), G Macfarlane (agenda item 8) and T Wolfe (agenda item 10).

1. **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 16 February 2022 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 Climate Assembly

The Committee was advised that work to develop the proposal for a University Climate Assembly was ongoing, and that consideration was being given to ensuring the provision of appropriate resource allocation.

**Action: KL**

2.1.2 COP26

The Committee was advised that a ‘case conference’ had taken place as part of the follow-up to the COP26 activities. The Committee noted that this had resulted in valuable activity taking place to gather information which would enhance the University’s voice around climate change. The Committee was also advised that an initial planning meeting had been scheduled to generate ideas for (i) COP27, and (ii) the University’s programme of environmental diplomacy initiatives, and anticipated receiving further updates.

**Action: MC/LR**

The Committee noted that the University had been shortlisted at the Herald Awards 2022 for Marketing/PR Campaign of the Year for ‘Cutting through the noise at COP26’, with Professor Pete Smith shortlisted for Research Project of the Year for Cool Farm Tool. Thanks and congratulations were recorded to shortlisted staff. [Professor Smith won the award at the ceremony on 31 May].

2.1.3 Aberdeen 2040 Implementation Plan

It was agreed that further discussion and activity around the action to develop an appropriate KPI to underpin Commitment 17 (staff and student engagement) would be taken forward outwith the meeting, with proposals to follow via circulation for approval by the end of Summer 2022.

**Action: KL/HS/FL/AL**

2.1.4 SDGs and THE Impact Ranking

The Committee was advised of the emerging need for the University to map its curriculum to the Sustainable Development Goals in a more impactful way. Consideration was given to how this could be achieved and the Committee noted that work was underway to embed the SDGs within a new framework of Graduate Attributes and Skills.

2.1.5 Sustainability Structures and Support

The Committee was advised that two new supporting posts had been approved for recruitment, with shortlisting for both a Net Zero and a Sustainable Development Officer underway.

**3.** **SUSTAINABILITY RISK REGISTER**

The Committee received and considered the Environmental Sustainability section of the University’s Strategic Risk Register. The Committee agreed to endorse the Risk Register subject to the following amendments:

* The inclusion of end dates for all ‘in progress’ mitigations; and
* The incorporation of Risk 2 as a sub-level of Risk 1, given its more operational nature.

**Action: FL**

The Committee discussed Risk 1: *Failure to make anticipated progress against institutional net-zero target*, and agreed that the rating and score were appropriate, given the significance of this risk theme.

Consideration was given to whether current risks relating to the war in Ukraine and supply chain difficulties should be added to the Sustainability Risk Register. It was agreed that as they were not unique to the Sustainability Risk Register, it was appropriate for them to continue to be captured in the Finance and the Estates & Facilities Risk Registers and via ongoing external environment risk management activities by the University Secretary.

Committee members were invited to provide additional comments and suggestions on the Register outwith the meeting. Particular attention was drawn to the need to ensure that (i) all relevant environmental risks were captured, and (ii) operational elements were identified for migration to a separate, operational register.

**Action:** **All**

**4.** **EMBEDDING SUSTAINABILITY RESPONSIBILITIES**

The Committee received a presentation from Fiona Smith, HR Manager (Partnerships) outlining the role of the Human Resources team in embedding the environmental, social and economic aspects of the Aberdeen 2040 Sustainability goals. The Committee noted actions which had already been taken, and the future actions which were planned, in relation to continually enhancing the focus of sustainability within (i) workforce planning, recruitment & selection, (ii) staff development, (iii) diversity & inclusion, and (iv) staff wellbeing & engagement activities.

The Committee welcomed the range of actions and initiatives presented and were supportive of additional activity to embed sustainability within as wide a range of HR practices as possible, including annual appraisal, academic workload modelling, virtual recruitment, flexible and hybrid working models and community engagement.

The Committee suggested that the HR team should seek feedback from staff members and recruiting Heads of School and Directors to (i) gauge the effectiveness of virtual recruitment processes and (ii) maximise the opportunities offered by the new flexible and hybrid working policies.

**5. UPDATE FROM AUSA**

The Committee received and noted the update on activities undertaken by AUSA between 5 February 2022 and 9 May 2022. The Committee welcomed the progress being made across a range of areas, including sustainability-related student activities (undertaken by groups such as the Secret Garden, Conservation Society, Energy Transition Society and Shared Planet amongst others), the Queen’s Jubilee Challenge, the AUSA Bike Hire Scheme, the submission to the NUS-SOS Green Impact award and Carbon Literacy Training.

The Committee considered the proposal that a Cycle Access Scheme be established for students. It was agreed that further consideration should be given to the scope and scalability of the Scheme, in line with other city partnership opportunities.

**Action: PE/AL**

The Committee was advised that student feedback to AUSA had highlighted that perceived safety risks were a barrier to cycling uptake and it was noted that the University was continuing to engage with the City Council, which was keen to address this issue.

The Committee also considered the proposal that Ecosia (a non-profit search engine that uses its funds to fight climate change) be adopted as the default search engine on library and classroom PCs.

The Committee was advised that due diligence undertaken by the Directorate of Digital & Information Services had identified Ecosia as a credible company with a sizeable user base and appropriate data sharing policies. The Committee was also advised that the search engine could be rolled out as part of the classroom summer IT refresh process if its implementation were approved via the internal governance structure.

The Committee noted that browser preferences could be an emotive issue, and it was highlighted that any change to default browser settings should be clearly supported by a statement on sustainability to underpin the rationale for the change with staff and students. Therefore, it was agreed that a detailed proposal would be brought forward for consideration at the next meeting.

**Action: BH/AL**

**6. CENTRE FOR ENERGY TRANSITION UPDATE**

The Committee received and noted an update on the activities ongoing within the Centre for Energy Transition. The Committee welcomed John Underhill to his first meeting as Director of the Centre and welcomed the progress which was being made in relation to interdisciplinary research activity, including (i) the *Oil & Gas in Transition: Delivering Just Transition to Net Zero in the North-East* event which had brought together stakeholders from academia, industry, policy and the 3rd Sector, with Gillian Martin MSP delivering a keynote address, and (ii) John Underhill’s paper being chosen to receive the European Association of Geoscientists and Engineers 2022 Nigel Anstey Award.

The Committee also welcomed the progress which was being made in relation to industry and public engagement, the ongoing enhancement of collaboration and partnerships (particularly with SFC) and the international discussions with Calgary and Curtin Universities.

The Committee noted that a recent UN statement had highlighted the importance of ensuring institutional compliance with UN climate objectives and that this had been interpreted by the national media as being a message that individuals should seek to avoid working for companies that had failed to demonstrate their commitment to tackling climate change.

**7. CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENT & BIODIVERSITY UPDATE**

The Committee was advised that David Burslem had been appointed as substantive Director of the Centre, effective from 1 June 2022.

The Committee received and noted an update on the activities ongoing within the Centre for Environment & Biodiversity and welcomed the progress being made across a range of areas, including (i) stakeholder engagement, (ii) PGR recruitment, (iii) the development of the Centre’s infrastructure and networks, and (iv) applications submitted for internal pump-priming funds.

**8. REPORT FROM SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS TRAVEL WORKING GROUP**

The Committee considered the findings and recommendations outlined within the report, which was presented by Gary Macfarlane, Chair of the Sustainable Business Travel Working Group. The Committee was advised that the Working Group had developed a suite of Guiding Principles of Sustainable Business Travel and a Travel Hierarchy to underpin the approach recommended within the report.

The Committee recorded its sincere thanks to Gary Macfarlane and Heather Crabb (chair and clerk to the Group respectively) for their work in gathering the data and producing the report. It was agreed that the Focus Group methodology adopted during the consultation process had represented best practice and could be transferred to other future sustainability initiatives.

It was suggested that a review of the existing Expenses and Benefits Policy be undertaken to ensure alignment with the Guiding Principles, and for the avoidance of any potential conflicts.

**Action: GM/MW**

The Committee formally approved the recommendations within the report and agreed that it should be presented to the Senior Management Team for (i) endorsement, and (ii) input from the University Secretary to ensure the recommendations are embedded within formal institutional governance and policy.

**Action: HC**

It was noted that, following SMT approval, a supporting communications and engagement plan would be developed to ensure that all members of the staff and student community were informed of the new principles.

**Action:** **GM**

**9. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS UPDATE**

9.1 THE Ranking Update

The Committee received and noted the analysis of the Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings 2022 which were published on 25 April 2022. The Committee was advised that the ranking had rapidly increased in scope from 462 participating universities at its inauguration in 2019 to 1,406 universities making a submission in 2022.

The Committee noted that, despite strong performance in many areas of the ranking analysis, the University had dropped in overall rank from 57th in 2021 to 101-200 in 2022. The Committee also noted that the University ranked in Quartile 1 for all SDGs except SDG2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

It was noted that the drop was partly due to the increased number of participating institutions, but also reflected changes in the online reporting mechanisms for the THE Ranking which meant that some of the University’s data had not been fully recognised. The University was currently in discussion with THE to challenge this.

The Committee was advised that the recent purchase of a Data Points Package from Times Higher would allow a more detailed analysis of the University’s performance compared to other participating universities and that the League Table Working Group and the SDG Working Group would consider the data in more detail before proposing actions to be taken ahead of the 2023 submission date.

It was noted that a detailed report would follow at the next meeting to ensure the Committee remained sighted on developments in this area. It was agreed that this should also provide an outline for the Committee of how the data is gathered and collated for the THE submission.

**Action:** **HS**

It was confirmed that significant activity was taking place within the sector to map educational curricula to the Sustainable Development Goals, and that this would be an important area of focus for the University going forward.

9.2 SDG Accord Update

The Committee was advised that work was ongoing to review and analyse the findings of the survey of institutional attitudes towards the SDGs. The institutional SDG Accord Annual Survey return has been submitted and will be made available to the Committee.

**Action: FL**

**10. CAMPUS ENERGY/HEATING UPDATE**

10.1 Energy Usage and Existing Heating Infrastructure

The Committee received a presentation from Tristan Wolfe, Energy Manager, summarising the current campus energy usage and the condition of the existing heating infrastructure.

The initial options being explored for decarbonising the University’s heat were outlined, and it was noted that these would form the basis of the Committee’s further decision-making, including consideration of wider Aberdeen City initiatives and partnership developments.

The Committee was advised that insulation and reduction of heat loss were equally as important as the sustainability of the heating infrastructure and system. Reducing heating demand would be a key factor alongside the choice of a new mode of heat generation.

The Committee agreed that (i) baseline planning data should be generated and shared with each School to outline their energy infrastructure and footprints (it was also suggested that this could potentially be aligned with the forthcoming rollout of new PowerBI management information data), and (ii) a reporting format and associated communications plan will be developed.

**Action: PE/TW/HS**

10.2 Sustainable Heating Strategy Update

The Committee was advised that, following the establishment of the SHS Project Board to focus on the future heating strategy for the University’s Old Aberdeen and Hillhead sites, a horizon scanning exercise was being conducted across sector institutions to identify potential sustainable approaches. This activity was being supported by a number of MSc students as part of their project modules.

The Committee was also advised that the Sustainable Heating Programme Board would recommend and oversee a series of co-ordinated projects in order to migrate the University’s current heating solutions to a more sustainable outcome.

**11. SUSTAINABILITY OPEN SESSION UPDATE**

The Committee was advised that the Sustainability Open Session on 25 April 2022 had been attended by over 100 members of staff and that the Question & Answer Session upon the conclusion of the presentation had generated a wide-ranging suite of suggestions and queries.

The Committee received and noted the questions which had been raised in relation to (i) Net Zero (including sustainable travel, energy efficiency and waste reduction), (ii) sustainability support & resources, (iii) stakeholder engagement, (iv) environment/biodiversity, and (v) education/research activities.

The Committee sought to identify some low resource, high impact initiatives that could be undertaken immediately in support of the feedback gathered at the session, and to encourage enhanced perceptions of the sustainability agenda. As a result, the following actions were agreed:

* Confirm the plans and agreed timeframe for the move away from the provision of plastic bottles and food containers by the University Catering service.

**Action:** FL/RINH Technician

* Review the suggestion to incorporate the *Too Good To Go* app into University signposting on sustainability.

**Action:** RP/FL

* Consider the feedback from the open session and suggest key elements for further consideration and development by the Committee to the Clerk.

**Action:** **All**

**12. PUBLIC BODIES’ LEADERSHIP ON THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY**

The Committee received and noted the letter from Michael Matheson MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy & Transport) in relation to the mandatory annual reporting duties by public bodies on their statutory climate change duties.

The Committee noted the introduction of the requirement to provide additional information in the November 2022 report in relation to:

* Target date for achieving zero direct emissions of greenhouses gases;
* Targets for reducing indirect emissions of greenhouse gases;
* How the University will align its spending plans and use of resources to contribute to reducing emissions and delivering its emissions reduction targets;
* How the University will publish its progress to achieving its emissions reduction targets;
* What contribution the University has made to helping deliver Scotland’s Climate Change Adaptation Programme.

The Committee was advised that the new Net Zero Officer role holder would take over as lead for the monitoring and engagement with public policy and the development of an evidence base for the University’s responses.

**13. GREEN GOWN AWARDS**

The Committee was advised that an institutional submission would be made to the Green Gown Awards.

**14. QUEEN’S PLATINUM JUBLIEE CHALLENGE**

The Committee received and noted the press release which had accompanied the launch of the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee Challenge by the Royal Anniversary Trust which had asked leading UK universities and FE colleges to work together to help their sector reduce carbon emissions to net zero.

**15.** **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Sustainable Development Committee will be held on Wednesday 24 August 2022 at 10.35am – 12.25pm via Microsoft Teams.