

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 6 JUNE 2024

Present: K Leydecker (Chair), M Beers, A Burgos Aguilera, D Burslem, B Lord, F Lovie, D Martin, R Philp, S Piertney, T Potts, W Tocher, U Witte and H Crabb (Clerk).

Apologies: J Barrow, H Battu, H Gannicliffe, B Henderson, J Huttich, C Osbeck, L Rattray, T Slaven, H Sveinsdottir and M White

In Attendance: R Lyne, T Wolfe

The Committee was advised that Adam Price had resigned from the role of Campus Trades Union representative and recognised his valuable contribution to its work over several years. Willie Tocher was welcomed as the new TU representative.

1. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 20 February 2024 were approved as an accurate record.

2. MATTERS ARISING

2.1 Table of Actions

The Committee received the Table of Actions (SDC20240529.2) arising from the previous meeting and noted the following:

2.1.1 Staff Sustainability Training

The Committee was advised that the e-module was at an advanced stage of development and would go live shortly for a soft launch. The importance of regularly promoting the training to encourage engagement across the University next academic year was recognised.

2.1.2 Sustainability Operations Group

The Committee was advised that consideration would be given to the possibility of training students to undertake clerking roles in some meetings as part of a wider review of committee support being undertaken by the Governance & Executive Support team.

3. INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS UPDATE

The Committee welcomed the progress which had been made towards implementing the recommendations arising from the Sustainability Internal Audit report (SDC20240529.3).

The Committee noted the impact of increasing resource constraints (financial and staffing resources) on progressing plans, particularly around travel and procurement.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT

The Committee received and considered the Environmental Sustainability section of the University's Strategic Risk Register (SDC20240529.4).

The Committee was advised that the Register had been amended to align Risk 1 (Funding & Finance) more closely to the related Strategic Risk Register risk. The Committee was also advised that a change to the scoring of Risk 4 (Sustainability & Emissions Reporting) had been proposed in view of the mitigations which had been implemented. In endorsing this reduced scoring, the Committee noted the robust institutional sustainability-related reporting approach which had gained recognition as being sector-leading in several areas e.g. PowerBI dashboard and the Student Travel tool.

The Committee agreed to endorse the Risk Register.

5. LIVING & WORKING SUSTAINABLY

5.1 Net Zero Update

The Committee received and welcomed the progress being made against various strands of Net Zero activity (SDC20240529.5), including (i) the Net Zero Strategy (see agenda item 5.2), (ii) the development of carbon and energy reports for 2022/23, and (iii) the submission of 2 projects to the Green Gown Awards (Student Relocation Emissions Calculation Tool and Sustainability PowerBI Dashboard).

The Committee noted that the EAUC had recently published its annual analysis of submissions to the Scottish Government via the Public Bodies Climate Change Duty (PBCCD) reporting process and that the total reported emissions had increased by 26%. It was recognised that this figure reflected the growing number of institutions including Scope 3 emissions and increases in emissions factors related to business travel and grid electricity. The Committee noted that this sectoral trend was consistent with the 27.6% increase in the institutional submission when Scope 3 emissions had first been included as part of the comprehensive institutional reporting approach.

The Committee noted the update on the current external landscape in relation to carbon credits and offsetting and was advised that an offsetting strategy would be required for residual unavoidable carbon emissions by 2040. The urgency of starting to consider the available options (e.g. tree-planting schemes, carbon credits etc.) was highlighted in view of (i) the long lead-times associated with the maturing of offsetting projects and (ii) the limited availability of carbon credits.

5.2 Net Zero Strategy (Strategic Discussion Topic)

The Committee received and considered the draft Net Zero Strategy (SDC20240529.6). The Committee noted that Scottish Funding Council guidance indicated that institutions should have a Net Zero Strategy in place by the end of 2024.

The Committee noted that the strategy envisaged the absolute elimination of Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions before 2040 i.e. the emissions categories predominantly associated with energy. The Committee recognised the complexities associated with the development of Net Zero targets associated with Scope 3 (indirect) emissions and agreed to endorse a more nuanced target of an absolute reduction in Scope 3 emissions of 55% by 2040, with a reduction of 90% by 2050.

The Committee was advised that the proposed suite of 11 decarbonisation pathways, linked to the Sustainable Development Goals, outlined illustrative decarbonisation activities for the majority of emissions sources across institutional operations. The Committee noted that although the role of carbon offsetting was only briefly referred to within the strategy, it would be an integral part of the eventual achievement of Net Zero (particularly in relation to Scope 3 emissions) and as such would be subject to a separate policy framework and guidance (see also agenda item 5.1).

The Committee was advised that a significant investment (in both capital and staffing resources) would be required to achieve Net Zero and that novel techniques were being explored within the HE sector to address this challenge e.g. strategic 'delivery partnerships' with external partners to provide capital funding for major infrastructure projects in exchange for long-term heat and/or power purchase arrangements.

The Committee was advised that an implementation plan and implementation board would be established to oversee the delivery of the Strategy once approved.

In discussion, the following points were raised:

- Further consideration of the extent to which key activities could be prioritised within the delivery of the Strategy might be beneficial;

- Additional focus on the actions required to outline how the strategy will be implemented would be helpful;
- Recognition that the scale of the challenges facing the University and the wider sector in achieving Net Zero is considerable;
- Concerns were raised that there may be some technical, infrastructure and investment barriers to delivering elements of the Strategy which could impact on the timescales and/or achievement of the Net Zero targets outlined within it; and
- Consideration should be given to the development of an appropriate communication plan to ensure the effective promotion of the Strategy (once approved) and the embedding of its key messages within operational activities.

The Committee agreed to endorse the direction of travel outlined within the draft strategy and recommended that a consultation plan be developed to include (i) SMT, and (ii) the wider community (via internal committee structures and other communication channels e.g. Ezine) at an early stage to inform its further development. The Committee recognised that in sharing the draft document more widely, some sections may require redaction to ensure the protection of commercially sensitive information.

Action: FL/TS

The Committee welcomed the development of the draft Net Zero Strategy, recognised the significant efforts and commitment which had been afforded to the drafting process and anticipated receiving a further revised draft for consideration in due course.

5.3 Draft Guidance for School & Directorate Sustainability Reporting

The Committee received and considered the draft Guidance for School & Directorate Sustainability Reporting (SDC20240529.7) which had been developed in response to an internal audit recommendation.

The Committee was advised that the guidance aimed to introduce a light-touch framework for target-setting and reporting which would encourage individual areas to focus on the aspects of sustainability where they could (i) have the most significant impact, and (ii) contribute to the achievement of institutional objectives e.g. reduce emissions, improve resource efficiency etc.

The Committee was advised that the model sought to embed the concept of the 'whole institution approach' within a formal process and welcomed the proposal to embed the activities within the existing annual planning round. The Committee noted the benefits of Schools and Directorates having the opportunity to reflect on their contribution to sustainability across a range of areas in this structured way e.g. embedding responsibility for delivering actions at School level, sharing best practice and minimising the risk of duplication of effort.

The Committee endorsed the implementation of the proposed guidance and it was agreed that the Framework would be shared with Heads of School and Professional Services Leads to inform its future development.

Action: FL/TP

Alongside the implementation of the proposed guidance within Schools and Directorates, the Committee also highlighted the importance of continuing to ensure that contractors receive information on (i) the University's approach to sustainability, and (ii) the expectations placed upon them while working on campus.

5.4 Update from Dean for Environmental Sustainability

The Committee received and considered proposals in relation to (i) The Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research & Innovation Practice (SDC20240529.8a), and (ii) The Laboratory Environmental Assessment Framework (LEAF) (SDC20240529.8b).

5.4.1 Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research & Innovation Practice

The Committee was advised that the Concordat was currently a voluntary initiative which committed signatories to maintaining cutting edge research while improving environmental responsibility but noted that it may become a more formal feature of the research environment in coming years e.g. as a potential condition for grant funding.

The Committee noted the wide-ranging focus of the Concordat (across emissions, water, biodiversity and waste) and its synergies with ongoing activities in relation to the UN Sustainable

Development Goals, Equality/Diversity/Inclusion initiatives, Modern Slavery, and Research Ethics & Integrity expectations. The Committee was advised that the Concordat focused on 6 priority/themes:

- Leadership and system change;
- Sustainable infrastructure;
- Sustainable procurement;
- Emissions from business and travel;
- Partnerships; and
- Impact & reporting data.

The Committee was advised that institutions could adopt either signatory or supporter status, and recognised the potential benefits associated with becoming a Concordat signatory – particularly in view of the broad support for it within the internal research community and across the sector. The Committee agreed to recommend to the Senior Management Team that the University enters the Concordat as a signatory. **Action: FL**

5.4.2 LEAF Accreditation

The Committee was advised that the Laboratory Environmental Assessment Framework (LEAF) had been established by University College London to improve the sustainability and efficiency of labs and had been identified as a key action during the 2023 Climate Assembly on Green Labs.

The Committee noted that the LEAF process involved individual laboratories undertaking a self-assessment of their sustainability performance measured against 48 criteria (supported by online calculators, toolkits and practitioner support) which resulted in the award of bronze, silver or gold accreditation via an online assessment portal. The annual cost would be £2K plus VAT.

In endorsing the proposal to implement the Framework, the Committee recognised its potential benefits, including (i) enhancing internal sustainability standards, (ii) introducing a consistent methodology for lab sustainability, and (iii) enabling the sharing of expertise and capacity within and across Schools. The Committee was also advised that accreditation could contribute to delivering substantial cost savings for Schools and institutional cost centres through its focus on improving energy efficiency, using materials more prudently and reducing waste.

Action: FL/TP

5.5 Re-Imagining Our Campuses Update

The Committee received and noted a summary of the key action areas relating to campus sustainability identified during the Re-Imagining our Campuses consultation process (SDC20240529.8c):

- Renewable infrastructure;
- Energy efficiency, heat and buildings;
- Education & Research;
- Sustainable travel;
- Biodiversity; and
- Campus Services.

6. RESEARCH UPDATE

6.1 Update from Interdisciplinary Centres

The Committee received and noted the report on sustainability-related activities within the Interdisciplinary Centres (SDC20240529.9) since the previous meeting.

The Committee welcomed the wide range of activities being undertaken, including (i) the successful funding bids, (ii) the list of submitted grant proposals and bids which were in development, (iii) the recruitment to the Development Trust funded Interdisciplinary PhD studentships, (iv) the wide range of Science Diplomacy initiatives and (v) sustainability-related events.

The Committee was also advised that the University had joined Scotland Beyond Net Zero, a new climate and sustainability coalition seeking to accelerate Scotland's transition to a post-net-zero future.

7. EDUCATION UPDATE

7.1 Update from AUSA

The Committee received and noted the update on sustainability activities (SDC20240529.10) which had been undertaken by AUSA since the previous meeting.

The Committee welcomed the progress which had been made including (i) the expansion of sustainability initiatives to the Foresterhill campus (Foodshare, SwapShop and Sustainability Fayre), (ii) various sustainability themed events, (iii) the success of the Zero Waste Shop, and (iv) the ongoing development of the action plans to underpin the Sustainability Framework (including a new Ethical Framework), (v) the re-establishment of the Raising & Giving Committee, and (vi) participation in the Academic Development Symposium.

The Committee also noted that the Student Council had passed an updated Climate Emergency Motion in April 2024 which would be incorporated in Students' Union policy for a period of 3 years.

8. AOB

Thanks were expressed to all members of the Committee (past and present) for their enthusiasm and commitment to advancing the sustainability agenda across the institution. The partnership approach in implementing institutional and student sustainability-related activities was welcomed and the significant achievements delivered during Session 2023/24 were recognised.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Sustainable Development Committee will be held on Wednesday 28 August 2024 at 1.35pm via Microsoft Teams.