UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SUSTAINABILITY STEERING GROUP

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 10 NOVEMBER 2021

Present : K Leydecker (Chair), J Bjorkqvist, P Edwards, J Fernandes, H Gannicliffe, J Huttich, F Lovie, L Rattray(agenda items 1-4), K Sadler, R Slater, T Slaven, A Speight (from agenda item 8), H Sveinsdottir, Y Tanino, C Torres-Barragan, N Vargesson, and H Crabb (Clerk).

Apologies : D Burslem, M Campbell, D Dyker, B Henderson, A Koster, R Philp, T Potts, A Price, and R Taylor.

In Attendance: G Macfarlane (agenda items 1 – 3)

The Chair welcomed Joseph Huttich, Pete Edwards and Josefine Bjorkqvist to their first meeting.

1. **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 August 2021 were approved.

2. **TABLE OF ACTIONS**

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

2.1 Universities Scotland Internationalisation Working Group

The Committee was advised that there had been broad endorsement of the principles outlined within the Working Group’s findings at national level.

2.2 Climate Assembly

The Committee was advised that discussions had taken place regarding the establishment of a University of Aberdeen Climate Assembly, which would provide a framework to engage the whole community in sustainability matters, support the achievement of the Sustainability commitments as outlined in the Aberdeen 2040 strategy and ensure that the momentum which had been gathered across the University in support of the COP26 event was maintained.

The Committee recognised that the successful planning and co-ordination of a Climate Assembly would require appropriate financial and staffing resource being made available. Furthermore, it was noted that several other initiatives were currently underway, including COP26 activities and the forthcoming launch of the Sustainable Business Travel consultation process. Therefore, it was agreed that a proposal to take forward a Climate Assembly would be developed and presented in early 2022.

**Action: KL/JF**

2.3 Sustainability Webpages

The Committee was advised that work was underway to refresh and update the Sustainability website.

**3.** **SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS TRAVEL WORKING GROUP UPDATE**

The Committee received an update on the progress that had been made to date from the Chair of the Sustainable Business Travel Working Group.

The Committee was advised that a comparative policy analysis had been undertaken of other policies adopted by Scottish universities to inform the development of a suite of draft outline Guiding Principles. In endorsing the initial draft Guiding Principles, the Committee suggested that they may be enhanced by reversing the order in which statements 1 and 2 appeared in the document.

**Action: GM**

The Committee noted the importance of balancing the need to travel for business purposes with the need to reduce emissions, particularly in the context of the geographical challenges facing staff based in Aberdeen. The Committee also noted the efforts which were being made by the Group to ensure that there was equity in the approach adopted across grade boundaries and protected characteristics, including caring responsibilities.

The Committee noted the challenges which were being encountered in relation to collating accurate data around staff business travel and commuting, including travel between campuses. The Committee was advised that a Travel Survey would launch shortly which would support the collection of additional data, and the importance of providing case studies to encourage members of staff to reflect upon whether travel was necessary (and if so, whether lower carbon transport options were available) was highlighted.

The Committee was advised that other Scottish universities had reached agreements with local public transport providers/operators to provide staff and/or students with discounted travel. It was noted that individuals under age 22 would be entitled to free bus travel from January 2022 and that ScotRail was soon to revert to government ownership. It was also suggested that a collaborative approach to transport providers from a group of universities may achieve more success than one institution acting alone. The Committee was advised that the Working Group would reflect further on these matters as part of the ongoing process.

The Committee was advised that an extensive consultation process would launch on 11 November, including a staff survey to gauge attitudes towards sustainable business travel options, Focus Groups (including open sessions and those dedicated to early career researchers and their needs) and the establishment of a dedicated email address to receive written submissions.

The Committee welcomed the progress which had been made by the Working Group and anticipated receiving further updates.

**Action: GM**

**4. SUSTAINABILITY RISK REGISTER**

The Committee received and noted the draft content for the new Environmental Sustainability section within the University’s Strategic Risk Register (SRR). The Committee was advised that the SRR had been presented in a new template, with all risks re-scored according to the new scoring approach, and that the focus had now shifted away from an emphasis on short-term Covid-related risks and mitigations towards the major strategic risks facing the University going forward.

The importance of considering other emissions beyond carbon in future was highlighted, although it was agreed that current KPIs should not be amended at this stage.

The Committee endorsed the proposal that the Risk Register be considered at the forthcoming Risk Workshop and subsequently presented to Audit & Risk Committee for approval, subject to: (i) inclusion of explicit reference to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, (ii) scoring Risk 1 higher to reflect the significant impacts associated with failing to meet the sustainability commitments, (iii) merging Risk 5 (capital investment) and Risk 6 (heating infrastructure), (iv) population of the Risk Manager column, and (v) reduce likelihood scoring of Risk 7 (integration & engagement).

**Action: FL**

It was agreed that the Sustainability Risk Register would be included as a standing item on future agendas.

**Action: Clerk**

**5. ABERDEEN 2040 IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

The Committee received and noted the current version of the Aberdeen 2040 Implementation Plan, including the actions and KPIs underpinning Sustainability Commitments 16-19. The Committee noted that the plan would be kept under regular review and anticipated receiving further updates, including the leadership of institutional-level KPIs, at future meetings as appropriate.

**6. UPDATE FROM AUSA**

The Committee was advised that an appointment had been made to the AUSA Sustainability Co-ordinator role and that the collaborative work on developing the University’s future investment strategy had been positively received within the student community. The Committee noted that AUSA had been represented at COP26 via (i) representatives attending sessions, and (ii) students who had participated in the rallies that had taken place in Glasgow during the event.

The widespread interest in community gardening and ‘green space’ initiatives amongst the student body was highlighted, particularly in relation to the Community Garden at Hillhead, the Secret Garden Society and the notes of interest which had been received from students on both the Foresterhill and Old Aberdeen campuses in such activities.

It was agreed that future updates would be provided as written reports.

**7. SUSTAINABLE HEATING STRATEGY**

The Committee noted the background to the establishment of the Sustainable Heating Strategy Project Board and its proposed Terms of Reference. The Committee was advised that work was ongoing to identify the most appropriate members of the Board, particularly in relation to ensuring that the appropriate expertise was drawn from within the academic community.

The Committee noted the recent publication of several national reports, including the Scottish Government Heating Buildings Strategy, and was advised that the findings and recommendations arising from these documents would be taken into consideration as part of the Project Board’s work.

**8. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND THE IMPACT RANKING UPDATE**

8.1 THE Impact Ranking

The Committee was advised that the SDG Working Group had continued to meet fortnightly and that the focus of activities had been on the sub-metrics where the University had scored less than 40/100 in the 2019/20 assessment. The Committee was advised that it was anticipated that the University’s scores in some areas would increase in the 2020/21 assessment, however, some issues beyond the University’s control e.g. student population from developing countries, could prove challenging to overcome in the short-term.

The importance of ensuring that initiatives being undertaken across the University are routinely reported and included on the SDG website to support the capture of data for future reports was noted. It was agreed that there should be regular reminders issued to members of staff to ensure that this becomes embedded as part of routine business.

**Action: HS/JF**

8.2 SDG Report

The Committee received and noted the draft SDG Annual Report 2020/21 and welcomed the range and impact of the featured activities which had been collated from across the University. The Committee was advised that the report would be promoted within the University community to raise awareness of the SDGs and ongoing activities once it had been formally submitted.

**9.** **CLIMATE UPDATE**

9.1 Draft Public Bodies Climate Change Duty Submission 2021

The Committee received and noted the draft submission in line with the annual Public Bodies Climate Change Reporting Duty. The Committee noted that the primary role of the report was to provide an institutional assessment of in-year emissions from a range of emissions sources and was advised that there had been a sizable reduction in emissions since 2019/20 of c. 3,746 tCO2e (primarily as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic). The Committee noted in particular the significant reduction in business travel emissions (as a result of Covid-19 pandemic travel restrictions) and the small impact of institutional waste management on the overall total.

The Committee was advised that the report represented the final year of submissions linked to the 2016-21 Carbon Management Plan and that as part of the transition to net zero, a wider range of emissions categories would be incorporated in future reporting (especially the more complex Scope 3 emissions e.g. procurement, commuting, student travel). The Committee also noted the efforts which will be made to improve reporting in some areas including adaptation and energy efficiency projects.

The Committee noted the importance of ensuring that references to Qatar acknowledged the campus’ impact on sustainable business travel. It was agreed that the text within the report should be re-visited to clarify that the campus is operated by a partner organisation in partnership with which the University delivered educational provision. Subject to the additional minor editing and formatting amendments suggested, the Committee agreed to recommend that SMT endorse the report for submission to the Sustainable Scotland Network.

**Action: FL (updates)/KL(SMT)**

9.2 UUK Publication: Confronting the Climate Emergency

The Committee noted the publication of the UUK report and the commitments made by UUK members in relation to setting targets for reducing emissions. The high level of ambition being shown by other institutions towards achieving net zero was highlighted and the Committee was advised that the University’s objectives in this sphere would be kept under review, particularly once the appropriate resource was in place to support the delivery of sustainability commitments.

**10. SUSTAINABILITY STRUCTURES AND SUPPORT**

The Committee considered the institutional structures which are currently in place to support the delivery of the Aberdeen 2040 sustainability commitments and the recommendations presented to enhance the available capacity (including appropriate structures, governance, staffing and budgets) to support meaningful progress across the breadth of the sustainability agenda.

The importance of the proposed sustainability team engaging with not only communications colleagues, but also with marketing and public affairs colleagues was highlighted.

The Committee welcomed the proposals, particularly in relation to the creation of a Dean role and the opportunities which the revised structure would present in analysing enhanced data to (i) underpin decisions around the University’s future strategic direction, and (ii) encourage data-driven changes to staff/student behaviour.

The important role played by students as ‘agents for change’ was noted, and the proposed establishment of a Green Office was highlighted as a positive innovation. It was suggested that student engagement in sustainability activities could also be enhanced by the creation of paid internships.

The Committee agreed to recommend that the proposals be presented for consideration by SMT and anticipated receiving further updates.

**Action: TS/KL**

**11. SUSTAINABILITY INVESTMENT IDEAS**

The Committee was advised that in October 2021, a call had been issued to the University community to propose potential initiatives for future investment covering the four Strategic Themes of Aberdeen 2040. The Committee received and noted a summary of the responses which had been received in relation to the sustainability theme.

The Committee was advised that although the number of staff who had submitted ideas was small in relation to the overall population, their enthusiastic engagement was welcomed. The recurring themes of enhancing ‘green spaces’ and biodiversity across campus was noted. The Committee also noted that several suggestions in relation to supporting a transition away from petrol/diesel vehicles had been received. The Committee was advised that obtaining detailed costs would be essential to underpin the consideration of opportunities to instal electric vehicle charging points and replace the University’s fleet vehicles.

The Committee was advised that SMT would consider the investment ideas received for each Aberdeen 2040 theme and anticipated receiving further updates.

**Action: TS/KL**

**12. UN GLOBAL COMPACT**

The Committee noted and endorsed the proposal that the University sign up to the 10 principles outlined within the UN Global Compact scheme, which reflect a set of foundational ethical considerations covering human and labour rights, the environment and anti-corruption. The Committee was advised that the proposal originated from a research funding application due diligence process which had resulted in a request from the British Council that the University becomes a signatory. The Committee was advised that although references to the scheme had previously been included in the institutional Sustainable Investment Policy and a Business School accreditation, the University itself had not hitherto been a Global Compact signatory.

In endorsing the University’s participation in the scheme, the Committee noted that there would be a modest reporting requirement but no direct financial implications and that the ethos underpinning the Global Compact fitted well with the University’s sustainability commitments.

The Committee agreed to recommend to SMT that the University becomes a signatory to the UN Global Compact.

**Action: KL**

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

The Group received and noted an update on the activities ongoing within the Centre for Environment & Biodiversity and welcomed the progress which was being made across a range of areas.

**14.** **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Sustainability Steering Group will be held on Wednesday 16 February 2022 at 10.35am via Microsoft Teams.