UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 16 FEBRUARY 2022

Present : K Leydecker (Chair), J Bjorkqvist, D Burslem, N Degama, P Edwards, J Fernandes, H Gannicliffe, B Henderson, J Huttich, C Torres-Baragan (vice A Koster), F Lovie, T Potts, A Price, L Rattray, R Slater, A Speight, H Sveinsdottir, Y Tanino, R Taylor, C Torres-Barragan, N Vargesson, and H Crabb (Clerk).

Apologies : M Campbell, D Dyker, A Koster, P McNaull, R Philp, T Slaven and K Sadler.

In Attendance: G Macfarlane (agenda item 1), A Michael and A Payo Payo (agenda item 4)

1. **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 10 November 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 Sustainability Structures and Support

The Committee was advised that approval had now been given for the proposal to enhance the resources available to meet Aberdeen 2040 sustainability commitments.

The Committee received and endorsed the proposal that a role of Dean for Environmental Sustainability proceed to SMT for approval. The Committee endorsed the draft job description subject to the following amendments:

* Review the document to ensure there are no overlaps between the Dean and (i) the new Sustainability team, and (ii) the Interdisciplinary Challenge Centres/Directors;
* Enhance the role of the Dean in driving forward the SDG agenda;
* Expand on references to the Dean making connections with other partners in the region, including citing examples of the breadth of stakeholders and co-ordinating the various local, national and international sustainability initiatives;
* Review the document to ensure there is clarity that the Dean will hold an Academic role and will support the Senior Vice-Principal in co-ordinating activities and providing academic leadership in delivering the University’s environmental sustainability commitments;
* Reflect the important role of the Dean in building on the COP26 momentum and achievements.

2.2 Sustainability Investment Ideas

The Committee was advised that discussions were ongoing in relation to delivering the following projects:

* Bicycle storage infrastructure at Hillhead;
* External recycling facilities on-campus;
* Solar PV projects; and
* Provision of electric vehicle charging points.

**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 the consultation process had concluded and that a broad cross-section of staff and PGR students based in both Aberdeen and Qatar had participated in the survey.

The Committee noted the key headlines arising from the survey responses and Focus Group discussion sessions, including:

* Two thirds of respondents had indicated their belief that air travel should not be restricted – although a similar number had identified activities which could be successfully undertaken virtually;
* Respondents had highlighted challenges associated with alternatives to air travel e.g. the high cost of rail fares and the impact of longer journey times (and potential impact on workload planning/modelling arrangements) – however, there was support for introducing a policy around the use of trains instead of flights for some or all UK travel, especially for journeys of up to 6 hours;
* A recognition that some business-critical activities would still require air travel e.g. international fieldtrips, student recruitment and fundraising, but that routine meetings could successfully be undertaken online;
* Respondents had reacted positively to the suggestion of introducing incentives or policy levers to achieve a reduction in emissions as an alternative to implementing punitive measures;
* Leadership by example will be key to promoting and embedding change in sustainable business travel behaviour e.g. case studies showing sustainable travel decisions by Heads of School/Directors of Professional Services and members of SMT were identified as potentially powerful influencing tools;
* Further awareness-raising and promotion of the services offered by the University’s appointed travel provider (currently Diversity Travel) is required.

The Committee was advised that at its next meeting in March, the Group would consider (i) a second draft report outlining initial draft recommendations and more detailed Guiding Principles and (ii) a list of key topics which had been identified by the Group as requiring more detailed consideration, including emissions data, incentivisation, travel authorisation processes and the possible establishment of ‘carbon budgets’.

The Committee welcomed the project which had commenced to implement a digital conferencing platform to encourage staff to host/attend virtual conferences and events. The Committee also noted the importance of ensuring that appropriate processes were in place to enable the collation and presentation of robust and detailed emissions data to encourage widespread behaviour change.

The Committee welcomed the inclusion of Qatar-based staff in the consultation process and noted that sustainable business travel practices would also have an impact on wider international partnership arrangements.

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

**Action: GM**

**4.** **COP26 OUTCOMES**

The Committee received a review of the COP26 activity which had taken place and welcomed the dedication and commitment from staff across the University in co-ordinating and delivering the University’s participation in the event.

The Committee was advised that the COP26 planning process had successfully delivered on its key objectives to: (i) increase the profile and reputation of the University through institutional activity and partner/network collaborations, (ii) use COP26 to highlight the interdisciplinary challenges and the sustainability targets embedded in the Aberdeen 2040 Sustainable theme, (iii) create opportunities to engage with government, media and other major external stakeholders, and (iv) galvanise the community around actions to support institutional responses to the climate emergency.

The Committee was advised that the University’s ‘Observer Status’ would continue and there was no further application process required in this regard. The importance of early forward planning to facilitate the attendance of individuals and groups at future COPs, including ensuring appropriate resources were in place to support them, was noted.

The Committee highlighted the importance of ensuring that the transformational experience of COP26 at both individual and institutional level was embedded in future sustainability activities and endorsed the following recommendations which had been brought forward as part of the post-COP26 review:

* Support a Climate & Sustainability Assembly in 2022 that embeds student and staff engagement, culture change and momentum;
* Continued investment in interdisciplinary climate and sustainability research and engagement, providing a ‘one-stop-shop’ for interdisciplinary seminars, events and training;
* Incorporate climate and sustainability principles into all levels of teaching, in all Schools, including development of new cross-School subjects and degrees; and
* Facilitate capacity building on staff and students on how to engage with partners in our region and support sustainability initiatives on campus and externally; have a visible Sustainability & Climate Hub on campus.

The Committee endorsed the principles underpinning the following recommendations and anticipated receiving a more detailed proposal on how they could be operationalised at a future meeting:

* Position UoA as a climate leader with a dedicated and visible Net Zero Strategy that engages staff and students, provides real upgrades to campus and infrastructure and drives a sustainability culture – ‘leading from the front’ as an institution in our region to demonstrate this;
* Support a continued COP/climate group, bringing together relevant professional services, academics and students that can strategically prepare for future COP attendance, embed into student experience and co-ordinate with research and teaching.

It was suggested that in developing the proposal, consideration could be given to (i) broadening the scope and focus of the proposed COP/climate group to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and (ii) identifying how a Science Diplomacy Strategy could be implemented (and the resources required to support it). The Committee anticipated receiving a proposal for consideration at a future meeting.

**Action: LR/TP/MC**

**5. EMBEDDING SUSTAINABILITY RESPONSIBILITIES**

The Committee was advised that Tracey White, Head of HR, had been unable to join the meeting due to the severe weather. The Committee noted the slides which had been prepared and agreed that the item should be deferred to the next meeting for a more detailed discussion.

**6. ABERDEEN 2040 IMPLEMENTATION**

6.1 Aberdeen 2040 Implementation Plan

The Committee received and noted the progress which had been made in relation to delivering Commitments 16-19 of the Aberdeen 2040 Implementation Plan. The Committee anticipated that the enhanced level of resource in creating a sustainability team would support the achievement of the activities which were noted as currently ‘lagging’.

It was noted that an appropriate KPI to underpin Commitment 17 (staff and student engagement) still needed to be developed. The Committee was advised that AUSA was developing a Student Award to recognise students who were making a significant contribution to sustainability. The Committee also noted that work was underway to support students in making more coherent curriculum choices relating to the Aberdeen 2040 themes which would enhance the availability of data in this area. It was agreed that these activities could be considered as a basis for developing the student metric.

The Committee agreed that staff metrics should not involve manual data collection or analysis and that further consideration would be given to developing an appropriate KPI.

The Committee anticipated receiving further updates.

**Action: KL/RT**

6.2 Education Update

The Committee received a presentation from Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education) outlining the progress made in relation to embedding sustainability in the Aberdeen 2040 Education commitments.

The Committee welcomed the activities which were planned and/or underway in relation to (i) developing the Aberdeen 2040 Graduate Attributes & Skills, (ii) the review of Aberdeen 2040 Delivery of Education (including the ongoing development of the physical estate and digital infrastructure), (iii) scoping curriculum opportunities associated with sustainability, and (iv) enhancing opportunities for international placements and learning.

The Committee noted the importance of curricular and extra-curricular activities in enhancing student employability, and the networking opportunities presented by the recent appointment of graduates to key sustainability roles locally and further afield.

**7. SUSTAINABILITY RISK REGISTER**

The Committee received and noted the extract from the Strategic Risk Register relating to Environmental Sustainability.

The Committee was advised that following the institutional risk workshop in December 2021, a consolidated ‘net zero’ risk had been created (by combining Risks 1 and 2). The Committee noted that despite mitigations having been identified, it had not been deemed appropriate at this stage to update the risk score.

It was agreed that Risk 4 (*inability to demonstrate meaningful commitment to sustainability* and linked to the Reputation risk) would be revised to include references to the risks associated with a failure to capitalise on opportunities.

**Action: FL/PE**

The Committee also noted that the register continued to reflect other key pressure points in implementing the sustainability commitments and recognised that the additional staffing resource approved by the Senior Management Team would support the future delivery of activities.

**8. ACTIVE TRAVEL PLEDGE**

The Committee received and noted the proposal to participate in the Active Travel Pledge co-ordinated by the Way to Work partnership. The Committee was advised that there was no financial commitment to making a pledge and that doing so would highlight the institutional commitment to promoting active and sustainable travel.

The Committee endorsed the proposal that the University makes the following pledge:

*“We pledge to monitor the impact of community and business travel and to promote active and sustainable travel opportunities for our staff and students.”*

**9. CLIMATE ASSEMBLY**

The Committee was advised that following the approval of additional resources to support the delivery of sustainability activities, arrangements for a Climate Assembly could now proceed.

The Committee noted that the Climate Assembly format required there to be written outputs that are (i) considered within the formal decision-making structure, and (ii) receive a formal response. It was agreed that the outputs from the University’s Climate Assembly would be brought to the Sustainable Development Committee for consideration in the first instance.

It was suggested that topics for discussion at a Climate Assembly could include (i) recommendations arising from the Sustainable Business Travel Working Group’s report, and/or (ii) active travel and commuting behaviour. The Committee also noted that the Dean for Environmental Sustainability would play a key role in ensuring the success of the Climate Assembly.

The Committee anticipated receiving a formal proposal for consideration at its next meeting.

**Action: FL**

**10. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS and THE IMPACT RANKINGS UPDATE**

The Committee was advised that the outcomes of the institutional submission to the THE Impact rankings exercise would be announced at the end of April. The Committee recognised the efforts of individuals across the University who had contributed to the development of the submission and who were now considering how future bids could be further enhanced.

It was agreed that it would be important to align the Civic University Agreement activities with the SDGs, and the Committee noted that this integration had been successfully achieved elsewhere in the sector.

**Action: HS/PE**

**11.** **UPDATE FROM AUSA**

The Committee received and noted an update on the activities ongoing within AUSA between September 2021 and February 2022 and welcomed the progress which was being made across a range of areas, including the AUSA Bike Hire Scheme, the Student Gardens plans, the provision of Carbon Literacy training, the re-opening of the student-run Foodsharing Hub and SwapShop and the launch of the AUSA Volunteer Portal.

The Committee congratulated AUSA on achieving a ‘Good’ accreditation in the NUS-SOS Green Impact audit and noted that a plan had been developed to enhance this rating to ‘Very Good’ in the next assessment.

**12. CENTRE FOR ENERGY TRANSITION UPDATE**

The Committee received and noted an update on the activities ongoing within the Centre for Energy Transition and was advised that John Underhill would take up the role of Centre Director on 1 March 2022.

The Committee welcomed the progress which was being made across a range of areas, including the submission of research proposals totalling £20M, the award of c.£2.5M across the CET themes and the ongoing programme of industry and public engagement activities, including the Oil & Gas in Transition Conference (23 March). The Committee was advised that work was ongoing within the remit of the Aberdeen-Curtin Alliance to advance the Global Energy Institute to enhance the interdisciplinary focus of energy transition (including social and economic sciences).

The Committee thanked Tavis Potts for his outstanding contribution to both the Centre and the Sustainable Development Committee during his role as Interim Director.

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

The Committee 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, including the submission of research proposals, the development of interdisciplinary networks and the ongoing programme of stakeholder engagement.

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

The next meeting of the Sustainable Development Committee will be held on Wednesday 25 May 2022 at 10.35am – 12.25pm via Microsoft Teams.