UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SUSTAINABILITY STEERING GROUP

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 25 AUGUST 2021

Present : K Leydecker (Chair), D Beattie, M Campbell, J Fernandes, H Gannicliffe, B Henderson, F Lovie, T Potts, A Price, L Rattray, K Sadler, R Slater, T Slaven, H Sveinsdottir, Y Tanino, R Taylor, N Vargesson, and H Crabb (Clerk).

Apologies : D Burslem, D Dyker, A Koster, A Speight, C Torres-Barragan and R Wells

In Attendance: G Macfarlane (agenda items 1 – 6)

1. **MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 5 May 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 Utility Consumption

The Group was advised that utility consumption data would be provided as part of the 2021/22 planning round.

2.2 Net Zero

The Group was advised that AFG was ultimately responsible for the Qatar campus development. However, every effort would be made by University representatives, via ongoing discussions and the KPI Framework, to ensure that matters relating to sustainability (including carbon emissions) remained a key consideration during the planning and construction phases of the project.

2.3 SDG Accord

The Group received and noted the SDG Accord submission. The Group was advised that the assessment had measured the University’s performance against methodology specific to the impact rankings process, and so the reported outcomes in some areas e.g. education provision, were not a broader indicator of institutional standards of delivery. It was agreed to review the approach to reporting outcomes in light of the discussion.

**Action: FL**

2.6 Universities Scotland Internationalisation Working Group

The Group received and noted the Working Group’s report. It was agreed that the report would be a useful resource for the Sustainable Travel Working Group, which will be led by Gary Macfarlane, Dean of Interdisciplinary Research & Research Impact.

**Action: Clerk (for distribution)**

The Group was advised that the Report had not been formally adopted by Universities Scotland but it was agreed that SMT members of the Group would give further consideration to its findings, recommendations and the extent to which they could be implemented at Aberdeen.

**Action: KL/TS/AS**

**3.** **ANNUAL REVIEW OF** **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The Group considered its Terms of Reference and agreed to recommend the following amendments to the forthcoming meetings of SMT and PaRC:

* Title – amend to Sustainable Development Committee (in recognition that the title of Group rather than Committee had led to perceptions that the work was of less strategic importance than other sub-committees of PaRC, and to reflect the various elements of sustainability and the importance of the UN Sustainable Development Goals);
* Reporting Arrangements – amend to read “The Committee will report to the Policy and Resources Committee via the Senior Management Team”; and
* Student Representation – amend composition to include a Postgraduate Representative.

**Action: Clerk**

**4. ABERDEEN 2040 IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

The Group received and noted extracts from the Aberdeen 2040 Implementation Plan 2021-2025 relating to Commitments 16-19. The Committee noted that SMT was reviewing the schedule of planned one-year activities and that a wider consultation process involving the whole University community on the proposed Aberdeen 2040 Implementation Plan had commenced.

A wide-ranging discussion to identify an appropriate Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for Commitment 17 surfaced ideas including the establishment of a Climate Assembly and the engagement of staff and students around sustainability activities.

The Group was invited to provide feedback on (i) the proposed Implementation Plan for Commitments 16-19 and (ii) any further reflections on the Key Performance Indicators (KPI), via the ongoing consultation process.

**Action: All**

**5. ENERGY UPDATE**

5.1 Pale Blue Dot Hydrogen Update

The Group received and noted the expression of interest which had been submitted to Pale Blue Dot Energy in response to the opportunity to explore mutual opportunities around the Acorn Energy Project (Carbon Capture and Hydrogen Projects in the St Fergus area of Aberdeenshire which seek to permanently sequester CO2 emissions generated from the reformation of natural gas into hydrogen).

The Group was advised that the proposal offered the potential for the University to physically use hydrogen as a future energy source, with the prospect of a green hydrogen infrastructure delivering a real “zero emissions” position over time. The Group noted that the expression of interest which had been submitted to potentially become a user of hydrogen produced via the project was non-binding.

The Group noted that in submitting the expression of interest, the University had highlighted the importance of building on existing academic relationships and nurturing new partnerships in relation to the research and operational opportunities offered by the deployment of hydrogen should the development proceed. The Group also noted that the response had highlighted that the University recognised the importance of ensuring that ‘blue hydrogen’ functioned as a bridge towards ‘green hydrogen’ with this transition being completed as quickly as possible.

It was noted that this was only one potential option being considered with regard to the future energy sources for the University (see following item).

5.2 Campus Heating & Energy Update

The Group was advised that the University had secured a £4M SFC loan to upgrade the existing heating infrastructure at Hillhead in partnership with Aberdeen Heat & Power. The Group also noted that a report had been commissioned from Zero Waste Scotland which had identified biomass as a potential alternative fuel source and that an opportunity may exist for the University to become involved in a hydrogen pilot with Aberdeen Heat & Power as an alternative to the original combined heat and power (CHP) proposal. It was also noted that the scope of the project will need to be extended to address the fact that the heating infrastructure on the rest of the Old Aberdeen campus would need to be upgraded in the near term, and the opportunity should be taken to consider all the future heating requirements for the University in the round.

It was, therefore, agreed that the Hillhead District Heating System Project Board should be reconstituted with a wider remit to consider the future heating strategy for the Aberdeen campuses as a whole. It was also agreed that it would be important to ensure appropriate staff and student representation on the Project Board, including academic representation from the Centre for Energy Transition.

**Action: DB/KL**

The Group was advised that academic colleagues from the Centre for Energy Transition alongside representatives from a broad cross-section of the institution had met to discuss campus heat and power matters and that this had generated several ideas including (i) establishing a Climate Assembly, (ii) how the broad spectrum of staff and student skills, knowledge and experience across the University could be engaged in undertaking research, analysing data and developing cost-benefit analyses of options, (iii) the importance of ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue on these matters and (iv) the merits and challenges of the various solutions proposed for Hillhead and wider campus heat and power issues.

**6. SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL**

6.1 Provision of Vehicle Charging Points on Campus

The Group was advised that there was a growing demand for vehicle charging points at both Old Aberdeen and Foresterhill, that some budget had been allocated to increase the number and noted that discussions were ongoing with colleagues in Aberdeen City Council to explore opportunities which may exist to participate in a City-wide scheme.

6.2 Sustainable Business Travel Working Group – Draft ToR

The Group was advised that the plan to establish a Sustainable Business Travel Working Group had been paused as part of the review of activity during the lockdown period and that work in this area would shortly re-commence. The importance of ensuring the ongoing engagement with staff (including members of Senate) and students during the work of the Group was highlighted.

The Group noted that the impact of student mobility, field trips, inter-campus movement and student exchange opportunities was an important factor in sustainable travel matters, although there was consensus that some of these issues may best be addressed via parallel discussions rather than directly as part of the Group’s explicit Terms of Reference. It was noted that the External Relations representative on the Group would be well-placed to facilitate liaison between the various strands of work involving staff and student matters in this regard.

**Action: JF**

The Group endorsed the proposed draft Terms of Reference, subject to the inclusion of (i) the expectations of external funding bodies in relation to sustainable travel and (ii) a PGR representative, and anticipated receiving progress updates from the Chair of the Working Group as a standing item on future agendas.

**Action: Clerk (for agenda)**

**7. SUSTAINABILITY BUDGET**

The Group was advised that £300K had been ring-fenced in the 2021/22 institutional capital budget to support sustainability initiatives. The Group was advised that capital expenditure was defined as (i) being over £20K in value and (ii) creating a “useful asset”, however, it was noted that some revenue resource may also be required to support the University in achieving its sustainability ambitions.

Suggestions for potential initiatives were made, including the provision of more vehicle charging points on campus, an expansion of the e-bike scheme, a review of the existing Estates Project Register to identify projects. The Group also welcomed activities which were ongoing in relation to the establishment of the Universities Scotland national HE/FE laptop refurbishment scheme.

It was agreed that as part of an update to the wider University community on progress made by the Group, an invitation should be extended to staff and students to propose potential initiatives that would meet the capital expenditure criteria.

**Action: JF/KL**

**8.** **UNIVERSITY PREPARATION FOR COP26 GLASGOW 2021**

The Group welcomed the progress which had been made in preparing for the COP26 Glasgow 2021 event. The Group was advised that it was anticipated that the institutional participation in COP26 would (i) enhance the University’s profile and reputation, (ii) highlight the Aberdeen 2040 interdisciplinary challenges and sustainability targets and (iii) create opportunities to engage with government, press and other major stakeholders.

The Group was advised that the University community had responded positively to the request to provide content, case studies, events and stories to support preparations for the event and noted the summary of information that had been received. The Group also noted that members of staff and students had been provided with the opportunity to apply for ‘observer status’ to attend the event.

The Group welcomed the information on the physical and digital Climate Capsule which was being developed by the School of Biological Sciences. The Group was advised that the capsules would be opened on Founders’ Day 2040 and would comprise a range of materials including: (i) physical capsule – a letter from the Principal, messages from local primary school children, a vial of air from November 2021 and (ii) digital capsule – messages and pledges on climate change and hopes for the future from staff, students, alumni, potential students and stakeholders.

The Group noted that branding templates to support promotion of COP26 and the University’s participation in it were available to download from the website. The Group welcomed the efforts that were being made to ensure that there was clear and consistent communication on the key messages around the institutional engagement with COP26.

**9. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS UPDATE AND REPORTING REQUIREMENTS**

9.1 Update on THE Impact Ranking Timeline and SDG Annual Reporting

The Group was advised that the deadline for the submission was 12 November. The Group noted the ongoing work to enhance the recording of activities across the University to support the development of the submission.

9.2 Public Bodies Climate Change Duties Report Update

The Group was advised that a requirement to calculate the impact on emissions of staff working from home had been included as a new category in the reporting process.

**10. CLIMATE ASSEMBLY**

10.1 Civic Charter for Scotland’s Climate Assembly

The Group welcomed the University’s endorsement of the Civic Charter for Scotland’s Climate Assembly and noted the evidence-based contributions from members of academic staff to its work.

10.2 University of Glasgow Climate Assembly

The Group received and noted the establishment of a series of Climate Assemblies within the University of Glasgow to underpin a review of environmental strategies (including carbon & energy management, travel planning, sustainable solutions & buildings, waste & recycling, biodiversity, food, climate change adaptation, procurement, ethical investment, student engagement and environmental communication) in light of the institution’s carbon neutral ambition.

The Group noted the importance of engaging the whole University community in sustainability matters and it was agreed that a Climate Assembly at the University of Aberdeen could provide a framework to support this process. The Group agreed that the Assembly should not be led by a member of SMT and it was suggested that consideration could be given to inviting applications from staff and/or students to co-chair sessions (as per the Aberdeen 2040 strategy development process). The importance of engaging with other organisations in the local community, especially other education providers, was highlighted. However, it was agreed that any joint Assemblies should be considered at a later stage once an internal Assembly had been established.

It was agreed that a Climate Assembly proposal would be developed and presented for consideration at the next meeting.

Action: **KL/TP/AP/JF**

**11. AURORA UPDATE**

11.1 Aurora Sustainable Campus Action Plan

The Group received and noted the Aurora Sustainable Action Plan which highlighted the following key topics for consideration by partner institutions in developing a campus-wide sustainability action plan: buildings energy efficiency standards, energy demand & energy production, mobility (staff and students), water, waste water & waste management, food & accommodation, procurement, accessibility (buildings and resources), biodiversity and monitoring & reporting of data. The Group noted that the University’s reporting process already covered the key areas highlighted within the Aurora Action Plan.

The Group noted that the Aurora document assumed that each partner would be responsible for setting its own goals and action plans, as well as for taking the required steps and establishing the appropriate organisational structures to implement them, and was intended to act as a set of high-level principles to guide the development of those individual approaches.

The Group was advised that SMT would shortly be considering a proposal on the University’s future participation in the Aurora network and noted the leading role that Aberdeen had played in the network’s international sustainability partnership activities.

**12. UPDATE FROM AUSA**

The Group was advised that AUSA had played a key role in supporting the institutional communication strategy around COP26 and that sustainability issues had played a key role in Sabbatical Officer election manifestos e.g. e-bike scheme and the development of a sustainable travel strategy.

The Group noted that there was keen student interest in the University’s commitment to divestment from fossil fuels and was advised that the institutional position would be confirmed following ongoing discussions at Investment Committee, PaRC and Court. The Group was advised that the assets held by the University in fossil fuel companies totalled less than 2.5% of the institutional investment portfolio and that the divestment strategy was being developed in partnership with the University’s financial advisers. The Group noted the regional interest in the University’s commitment to divestment and was advised that careful consideration was being given to engaging and communicating with local industries in relation to ensuring a just energy transition. The Group was advised that a dedicated webpage, including FAQs, would be developed.

It was agreed that AUSA would be involved in discussions on divestment ahead of formal proposals being submitted to PaRC and Court.

**Action: DB/KL/JF**

**13.** **CENTRE FOR ENERGY TRANSITION UPDATE**

The Group was advised that key external players from a range of industries, civic society and government had agreed to participate in the Centre’s Advisory Board. The Group was also advised that the recruitment process to appoint the Centre Director was underway.

The Group welcomed the progress made within the Centre, particularly in relation to the submission of grant proposals (£19M), with £1.7M of funding being received to date across 8 thematic areas.

The Group was advised that the Centre had successfully delivered the first University-wide Energy Transition Fund course in partnership with Total and that 144 Masters students had graduated on a zero credit basis.

The Group welcomed the continuing progress within the Centre.

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

The Group received and noted an update on the activities ongoing within the Centre for Environment & Biodiversity. The Group was advised that a series of positive discussions had taken place with representatives from across the University to establish a network of contacts, catalyse internal leads for Centre activities and discuss the long-term ambitions for the Centre. The Group also noted activities which had taken place with external stakeholders to initiate dialogue on the scope for extending current and future collaborations.

The Group noted the set of initial ‘core’ themes which had been identified for the Centre (confronting the biodiversity crisis, sustaining natural resources, environmental protection & management, adapting to global change, education for sustainability and environmental histories) and was advised that a series of 4 cross-cutting themes encompassing the other four Interdisciplinary Centres had also been identified.

The Group welcomed the support provided by the Centre to staff in developing grant funding applications and the Centre’s contribution to preparations for the COP26 Glasgow 2021 event.

The Group noted the positive impact of the initial pump-prime funds which had supported 48 projects to date, many for early career researchers.

**15. RESOURCES FOR INFORMATION**

The Group received and noted the HE Climate Action Toolkit which had been published on the EAUC website.

**16.** **AOB**

16.1 APUC Responsible Procurement Group

The Group welcomed the contribution made by Aberdeen representatives to the APUC project which had secured the services of EcoVadis to review suppliers’ sustainability credentials as part of the procurement process within the HE sector.

**17.** **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Sustainability Steering Group will be held on Thursday 25 November 2021 at 1.35pm via Microsoft Teams.