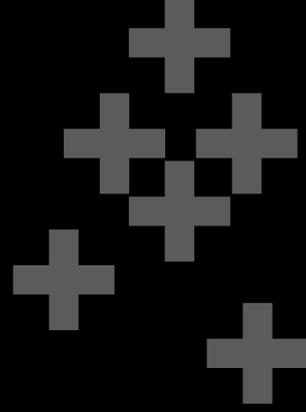


# UHI

## Sustainability Strategy





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# 1

## UHI's Sustainability Strategy to 2030 is a bold step in recognition of the ecological and climate emergencies facing our young people.

The strategy is one that enables and initiates actions for a better future for people and our planet. It is the start of a process of future proofing UHI for the unprecedented changes, impacts, and the opportunities the institution will have to realise and contend with. Not only will UHI reduce its emissions it will become energy secure and importantly adapt to climate change reducing its risks and vulnerabilities.

Aligned with our strategic theme of being an environmentally sustainable institution we will reduce our wider environmental impacts, re-balance, correct and continuously improve to become a 'One Planet' institution using United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as our benchmark and to measure our progress. We will embed SDGs in our learning and teaching, equipping our students to play their part to make a positive difference to their communities and the natural environment at a time when the world is experiencing unprecedented environmental changes.

Our Green Champions Network of staff and students and our Students' Association will be represented in the implementation and monitoring of this strategy.

We look forward to working together on implementing this strategy and collaborating with a wide range of stakeholders, agencies, communities, and those who share our sense of urgency and values and the important work that follows.



**Vicki Nairn**  
UHI Principal and Vice-Chancellor

**From operational excellence across our estates to learning and teaching and knowledge exchange, the objectives in this strategy will begin to set UHI apart in its climate and sustainability commitments and approaches.**

# 2

## Why are we doing this?

As a platform to **Act**. The evidence confirming the extent of negative human impacts on the planet, the climate and ecological breakdown is overwhelming and accepted. Nature and place are also rooted in the culture and identity of the Highlands and Islands. The natural world also has intrinsic value. We need to stop talking and start doing to provide the hope and opportunities for future generations.

**The pace and scale of what has been done so far and current plans are insufficient to tackle climate change<sup>1</sup>.**

## Vision = **A one planet, net zero partnership**

UHI is a unique institution and its vision for leadership, learning, innovation and action on the climate and ecological crisis facing the Highlands and Islands is also unique. The university will achieve or exceed net zero emissions and become energy

secure by 2040 at the latest. It will put plans in place to become a 'One Planet' university aligning itself to actions on the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals at the earliest opportunity and no later than 2040.

## What does 'net zero' mean?

Net zero means that as a university, for all operations and activities we emit no more greenhouse gases than we remove from the environment. The university is committed to reducing emissions and moving to a position of over generating on renewable energy and sequestering CO<sub>2</sub> through its own land management (insetting). Offsetting or other carbon capture via third parties will be options of last resort when all other options and possibilities have been exhausted.

**The IPCC contends that over this decade 2020-2030, the world must transform its energy, land, urban, infrastructure, and industrial systems at a scale and speed with 'no documented historic precedent'.**

<sup>1</sup> IPCC AR6 Report March 2023

# 3

## Context

There is a clear responsibility on a university to shape a new future, to work to re-balance and discard an unsustainable legacy. From the IPCC, UN-FCCC, the UK CCC, World Resources Institute, the BBC, by neighbouring councils or in the form of UK and Scottish Government legislation and policy there is a surfeit of evidence, data, statements, speeches and programmes that tell a story of planetary degradation and pollution. Something needs to change. The use of fossil fuels must end. We all need to act. This strategy is a strategy for **Action**.

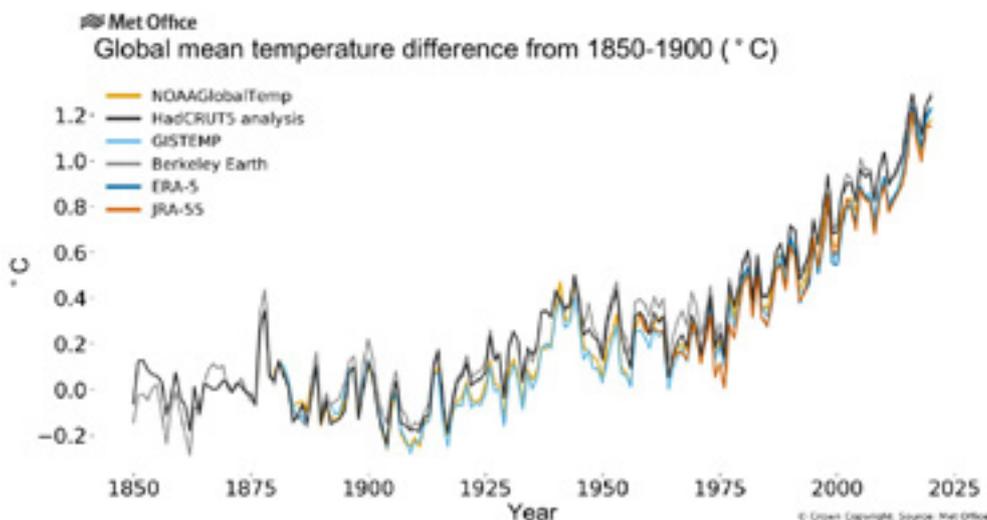
**Climate resilient development becomes progressively more challenging with every increment of warming. This is why the choices made in the next few years will play a critical role in deciding our future and that of generations to come.**

**To be effective, these choices need to be rooted in our diverse values, worldviews and knowledge, including scientific knowledge, Indigenous Knowledge and local knowledge. [IPCC AR6 Report March 2023]**

Accepted methodologies show that each of us use and consume around 3 planets worth of resources in the UK<sup>2</sup>. In a global context this means that we now reach a point of environmental deficit earlier and earlier each year (July 22nd in 2022.) We are essentially borrowing more and more from the planet and from future generations. This is unsustainable. The effects on humans of climate change and environmental damage are not felt equally with many groups and populations being disproportionately affected such as women, those in poverty, coastal and island communities and people with health conditions, communities already suffering water stress (too much and too little).

Evidence from UN predictions show that the Paris Agreement target aiming to hold global warming to 1.5 degrees this century is unlikely to be met taking us into the realm of catastrophic climate breakdown (UNFCCC). The UN predicts however that commitments on emissions reductions from governments NDCs<sup>3</sup> may mean that warming could still be held at 2.5 degrees. Even this scenario is well into climate breakdown territory (UN). The UK is however only responsible for emitting 1.02% of CO2 emissions and about 1% of all GHGs.

99% of CO2 emissions are therefore outside of our direct control and influence<sup>4</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> IPCC AR6 Report March 2023

<sup>2</sup> NE Global Footprint Project Aberdeenshire Council

<sup>3</sup> NDC – Nationally Declared Contributions

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia using the EDGAR Database 2017 & WRI 2020

# 3

## Context

This weight of evidence makes a difference. The legislative and policy landscape has changed. In May 2022 the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport wrote to all University and College Chairs and Principals setting out new obligations for sector leadership on the climate emergency. Critically this included a requirement to align spending plans and resources to this agenda including delivering net zero targets. The Scottish Government declared a climate emergency in May 2019, and it has set world-leading ambitions and legally binding climate change legislation that sets a target date for net zero emissions of all greenhouse gases by 2045. This landscape mandates action and should empower staff to act.

This strategy is not purely about climate change. The scope of the strategy extends across all UN SDGs – dealing with pollution, health, food, waste, use of resources (Procurement), travel and biodiversity. The detail of how UHI will deal with many of these important topics will follow this strategy. Biodiversity is a priority because of the ecological emergency facing us. In light of further mounting evidence that Scotland continues to experience dramatic declines in biodiversity, the Scottish Government has also set out an ambitious new strategy to halt biodiversity loss by 2030 and reverse it with large-scale restoration by 2045 (Nature Scotland). Campus plans and greenspace management should align with these objectives as minimums.

**Climate, ecosystems and society are interconnected. Effective and equitable conservation of approximately 30-50% of the Earth's land, freshwater and ocean will help ensure a healthy planet. IPCC AR6 March 2023.**

We know that windows of opportunity routinely referred to by politicians and experts are closing. However, events over the last couple of years have shown that rapid, indeed overnight change can happen if there is the will. In HE the almost overnight switch to online learning being a case in point. Experience from the Pandemic showed that there can be an immediate decoupling of environmental impacts when certain human activities stop. The IEA calculated that there was a 5.8% fall in emissions worldwide in 2019/20. This is the equivalent of all the EU's emissions<sup>5</sup>. Levels of finance and borrowing incurred to deal with Covid-19 are also needed to address the climate and ecological crisis.

The conflict in Ukraine has highlighted structural and market frailties in the energy industry exposing how energy insecure we all are, even nation states. Energy security should now be a UHI Estates priority across all partners. Cuts to emissions will result from becoming energy secure and transitioning away from fossil fuels at pace.

Avoided future energy costs and exposure in a turbulent global context are at the heart of the energy security emphasis of this strategy. Income generation through energy opportunities beyond net zero must also become the norm. Whilst this high-level strategy contains commitments and targets for net zero its scope is a comprehensive one and beyond net zero. It will include all emissions CO2 and other GHGs across scopes 1, 2 and 3 including procurement, waste management, use of resources and materials, staff and student travel. Work with partners such as APUC, SFC, local councils, HIE and other stakeholders and communities will be key to the success of this strategy and for collaboration on common and shared risks and issues.

The regions covered by UHI are making progress on CO2 reduction albeit with some communities having high Per Capita totals. Per Capita CO2 emissions across all UHI council areas fell on average over the period 2005 to 2019 by 29.1%. This is in the context of our energy mix, building types, travel distances and a challenging geography<sup>6</sup>. Whilst this is good progress, more needs to be done.



# 3

## Context

UHI will therefore build on our excellent teaching and world-class research in climate change and sustainability-related subjects, together with leadership in sustainability, to help us achieve the ambitious target of 'net zero' by 2040 whilst simultaneously managing climate and environmental risks and urgently adapting to climate change.

Together these interconnecting agendas will have a significant bearing on our areas of teaching and research, recalibrating what the university does, and how we direct and deploy these resources equipping our young people to seek out opportunities in the face of these challenges. The twin emergencies of climate change and ecological breakdown will redefine what we understand prosperity to mean and look like in the 21st century and they will transform the manner in which we perform not only learning and research but how we work together with partners as well as all of our operational activities: from buildings management, procurement and waste management to travel.

We should not be daunted or overwhelmed just yet. Many of the solutions and answers have existed for some time (they are tested and proven, they simply need implementing at scale and pace). This should be easier as this agenda should now be regarded as a compliance set of issues. UHI will work on maximising available funding, enabling joint working (e.g., through the Hub) and collaboration on common issues, driving innovation and research, projects and bids. Working in this way across the UHI partnership will create an attractive economy of scale and crucially the circumstances for learning from one another<sup>8</sup>.



# 4

## Role, Scope, Status and Governance

This strategy applies across the UHI partnership **where it is required**. Where partners already have their own or are working towards approving similar strategies they should align with the objectives and targets in this document as a minimum. They are encouraged to exceed the objectives and targets in this strategy if they are able to do so. This document is the start of a journey towards an integrated, unified approach to sustainability and climate change.

Alongside this strategy a new Sustainability and Climate Change Policy has also been approved. This sets out the agreed policy position across UHI and will contain a summary of our legal duties, obligations and UHI priorities. Together what these documents contain will be a mandate for change, empowering all staff and students to engage with and own this agenda.

This strategy and the Policy are ultimately owned by the University Court but in effect it will be everyone's responsibility. Each member of staff will be obliged, as with other areas of compliance, to comply with policy and strategy on climate change and sustainability. Work will be managed, overseen and monitored by a Cross Partnership Net Zero Strategy Implementation Group. The student cohort of our Green Champions Network with HISA will be developed as a forum for reporting to students and for review and scrutiny. Service delivery will be regularly audited by internal audit. Progress against targets will be reported to Partnership Council, to Court, UHI Green Champions and to the Scottish Government.

For brevity, this document uses the terms 'climate change' and 'net zero' as a proxy for wider activity on areas and themes across the environmental sustainability agenda, climate justice and Just Transition. Those that will feature more prominently in such action plans as are needed to support this strategy and implement rapid and transformational change and disruption; resource use and material flows being examples. Action and implementation will be the priority. Actions will align with other complementary projects and programmes such as UHI 2024 and the Net Zero Hub. In turn these will align to policy and targets in this document and other duties and obligations. This work will assimilate and use any previous work supporting this agenda e.g., the baseline work on sustainability topics previously undertaken. Where we can just get on with things UHI will endeavor to do just this.

Our Outcome Agreement submission to the Scottish Funding Council makes clear that UHI is putting measures in place to – *take urgent action to help reduce or halt climate change, avoid irreversible damage, and support environmental sustainability measures.*

**This strategy will be reviewed annually.**



<sup>8</sup> Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, UK Committee on Climate Change, World Resources Institute.)

# 5

## Consultation and engagement

This draft strategy has been developed and consulted on internally. Strategy development and drafting had its own steering group, the net zero acceleration group as well as a larger Cross Partnership Group. Since the recruitment of a new sustainability manager there has been further engagement with staff and students through the Green Champions network and a dedicated student online workshop has also been held to inform the strategy. Consultation with external partners has also been undertaken with: APUC, SFC and with selective Councils, statutory bodies, Scottish Water, HIE and SSE.



## Outcomes what do want to achieve?

- 1 Change mindsets and behaviours. Empower staff & disrupt the status quo.
2. Energy Security and Net Zero emissions.
3. To be resilient and adapted to climate change.
4. Minimise and manage our use of resources including procurement.
5. Increase biodiversity. Managing land, water and soils for climate and biodiversity.
6. Support, train and enable students, leaders, staff and key partners to deliver our vision.
7. To embed learning for sustainability into all courses.
8. Meet UN SDGs. A One Planet approach.
9. Prioritise and align research and knowledge exchange with our vision.
10. Report and monitor performance.

# 6

## Key targets

### 1. Net Zero and Energy Security

#### Target

Net zero across all activities by 2040 or earlier and 75% reduction by 2030 or earlier. An Energy Secure UHI by 2040

#### Target

Zero emission "heat in buildings" across all campus buildings by 2030.

#### Target

Complete comprehensive baseline assessment of all emissions, across scopes 1, 2 and 3 (including procurement) by June 2024 and the production of interim emissions targets including meeting 75% reduction by 2030.

#### Target

Because of UHI's unique geography and its size, to work with partners and stakeholders to put measures in place to decarbonise university travel.

Student Travel Beginning/End of Year (UK & International), Commuting – students & staff, Business & Academic travel including Grey Fleet.

### 2. Increase Biodiversity

#### Target

Commit to protect at least 30% of our campus ground cover being managed to deliver healthy and thriving ecosystems (On campus green/blue habitats) by 2030.

### 3. Learning and Teaching

#### Target

All Teaching Staff trained to embed sustainability into taught courses by December 2025.

#### Target

Embed Learning for Sustainability into all taught courses by 2027 at the latest.

### 4. UN Sustainable Development Goals

#### Target

All UHI partners sign the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Accord by December 2023. By signing each partner accepts a key role in fighting global injustice and committing your institution to a central and transformational role in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

### 5. Training

#### Target

Conduct Sustainability Leadership training for members of University Court, College Boards and Senior Executive Teams across the partnership.

Compliance. Introduce sustainability into HR processes and training for all staff. New induction presentation on sustainability & climate change to start in April 2023.

#### Target

Mandatory sustainability training rolled out to all staff by January 2024.

# 6

## Key targets

### 6. Risk, Resilience and Climate Adaptation

#### Target

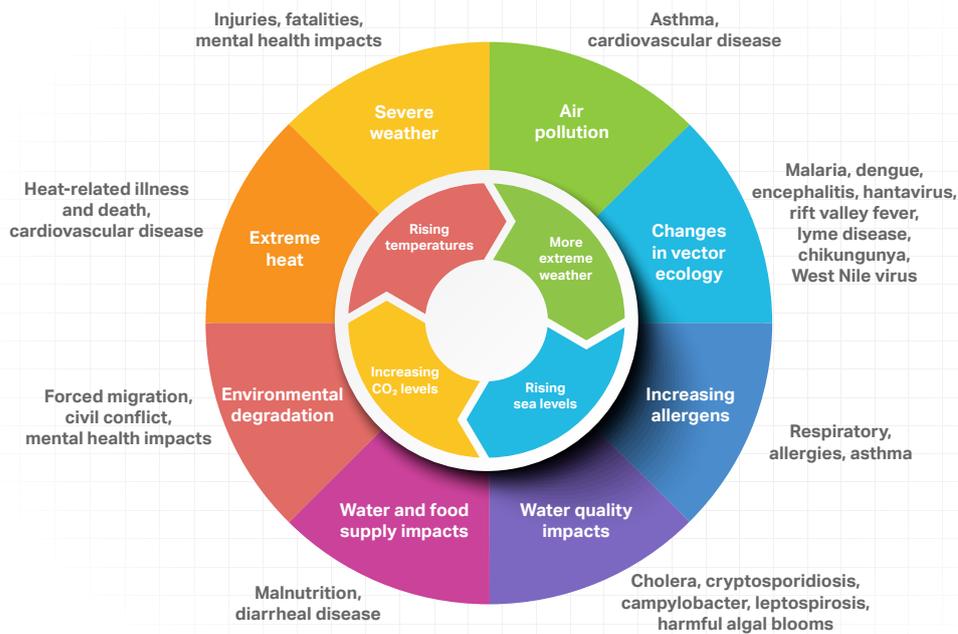
Reducing vulnerabilities and adapting to life in a changing climate – involves adjusting to actual or expected future climate. The goal is to reduce our risks from the harmful effects of unavoidable climate change (like sea-level rise, more intense extreme weather events or food insecurity).

### 8. Communications

#### Action

To develop a communication and engagement plan working with stakeholders including the Green Champions Network to accompany and support this strategy.

## Climate Effects on Human Health



Reference: Centres for Disease Control and Prevention

### 7. Knowledge Exchange and Research

#### Target

For KE Research priorities to include and align with this strategy as well as Scotland and UK objectives and targets and for consistency with SFC, UKRI and Research Council requirements including on UNSDGs, Net Zero, Climate Risks (UK climate Risk Assessment/CCC) and biodiversity.

### 9. Implementation, Monitoring and Reporting

#### Action

To establish a strategy implementation group that will drive change and report on progress to forums and committees including Court.

# 7

## Conclusion

The university recognises that locally, regionally and within the Higher Education sector it is considered as a leader on aspects of sustainability and climate change and an organisation to follow. This strategy and forthcoming action plans where they are needed are all designed to move UHI from what is a starting position to best practice and community leadership over a compressed time period. Critical to this will be how risks are managed and how the institution adapts to climate change. UHI may also have to go further faster. This document demonstrates our intent; it is the beginning of a period of progress against ambitions, commitments, policy and compliance. Demonstrating the steps UHI will take together, those required in order to avoid catastrophic ecological breakdown and climate change.



# 8

## Appendix

Indicative and/or proposed actions to accompany headline targets.

Actions/omissions to act (business as usual) may be subject to costings/avoided costs/risk, exposure and compliance analysis.

### 1. Net Zero/Energy Security Actions:

**Action** Each institution develops an initial sustainability action focussed operational plan(s) that align to this strategy and targets (To be completed by April 2024).

**Action** Develop an Energy Security & net zero spending and investment plan to facilitate the execution of the action plans (To be completed by April 2024). Include an evaluation for the introduction of a UHI carbon budget.

**Action** Implement a standardised Carbon Assessment into our key decision-making processes across the partnership (To be completed by August 2023) beginning with new Project Methodology and Report template sections.

**Action** Review and update all policies to embed sustainability and climate change as a key policy priority. (Begin policy review in May 2023).

**Action** Prepare for the introduction of a Carbon Budget at the earliest opportunity – subject to baseline quality and accuracy. Align this to emissions baselining work. (Phased approach towards incorporation of all scopes.)

**Action** All UHI partners to sign up to the Race to Zero, a global initiative for a Zero Carbon world.

**Action** As part of development of this strategy complete a baseline assessment of the partnership's current position against the agreed targets (set targets if not already completed) & develop and implement a Race to Zero/Net Zero action plan (To be completed by early 2024) aligned to or exceeding 2040 target.

**Action** Agree a robust and accurate baseline/s reporting year/s for Executive Office and UHI Partners.

**Action** Conduct energy assessments on all the partnership's estate (To be completed by Dec 2023 (check this date with Estates Group)).

**Action** Develop a heat in buildings net zero strategy and plan that will achieve the 2030 zero emissions target across the partnership's estate & consistent with energy security. Using internal capacity & expertise if possible. (To be completed by Dec 2023).

**Action** Define organisational and operational emissions boundaries, so as to ensure accurate and consistent measurement and reporting of emissions (To be completed by October 2023) with External/3rd Party and help establish baseline.

**Action** Develop action plans to quantify emissions across all scopes, including procurement (To be completed by October 2023). With External/3rd Party. Part of enabling work for introduction of Carbon Budget. (See above.) Action - Align baseline exercise with Race to Zero assessment.

**Action** Develop policies and tools that: prioritise home country learning, minimise journeys and introduce a travel hierarchy for students and staff, incentivising avoiding travel, net zero options and using public transport. Introduce an annual staff and student travel survey, beginning in 2023 and in place by end of 2024.

**Action** Actively promote home/hybrid working and use of digital media to avoid and reduce the need to travel. Review of hybrid working policy to align with net zero targets and business need requirements.

**Action** Explore specific targets where needed. (See Carbon Budget)

**Action** Use funding, policy, tools and instruments to accelerate adoption and use of zero carbon vehicles, EVs, vehicle fuels/other energy sources.

**Action** Examine feasibility of insetting any residual emissions from travel on UHI estate.

## Appendix

### 2. Biodiversity:

**Action** Conduct baseline biodiversity and land/soils asset surveys including CO2 storage on all sites by June 2024 and commit to survey updates biennially. Incorporate inseting audit on UHI land.

**Action** Develop/revise action plans and existing land management, grounds maintenance regimes and plans to increase biodiversity and store carbon (To be completed by February 2024). Working with Nature Scotland and Council Partners.

### 3. Learning and Teaching:

**Action** Develop an operational plan to train all teaching staff in sustainability and how it can be embedded within their day-to-day teaching practice ongoing with CPD with refresher training. Possible internal commission for training provision? Commission the operational plan internally or externally (To be initiated in summer 2023 & completed by February 2024 ). Evaluate 'Core' training provision using Learning & Teaching Academy model. Develop plans for initial mainstreaming of Learning for Sustainability/ESD. Core modules for taught courses. Make a key focus of the Professional Development programme for 2023/24 academic year.

**Action** Develop a roadmap and implementation plan to embed Learning for sustainability and/or education for sustainable development into all taught courses, to provide all students with learning opportunities to develop their understanding of sustainability and equip them with the skills and resources needed to apply their learning to contribute to a less unsustainable society. (To be completed by December 2023). To begin approval/re-approval process for taught undergraduate courses with PG, HNC/ HND to follow. Alignment with themes in UHI 2024 and curriculum review and other projects to support and enable this action.

### 4. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals:

**Action** Complete a baseline assessment of the partnership's current position against the 2030 targets (To begin in January 2024 ).

**Action** Develop and implement a SDGs action plan (To be completed by October 2024). Possible use of internship or external commission.

### 5. Training:

**Action** Develop and implement a sustainability training course for leaders and all staff by End of 2023 to be implemented in 2024 or earlier.

**Action** Develop and implement a sustainability training course for staff by April 2024 Carbon literacy training/SDG Training & work with partners on jointly procuring future proofed training package/s . Work with partners where applicable.

**Action** Reinforce existing policies and introduce a suite of staff behavioral change projects using the green champions network – on waste, water, food, travel, use of resources with multi-benefits including reducing emissions. (September 2023)

### 6. Risk, Resilience and Climate Change Adaptation:

**Action** Regular review of strategic and operational climate risks and escalation. Convene new/ existing partner group (including external partners: SEPA, HC, HIE, Scottish Water etc) to review risk register.

## Appendix

### 7. Knowledge Exchange and Research:

- Action** Sustainability and Climate change alignment and reference in KEF and REF Submission, SFC Outcome Agreement.
- 
- Action** To secure Innovation funding from SFC/ Other sources to support KE and Research priorities consistent with leadership obligations, targets and actions in this strategy. UHI 2024 overlap.
- 
- Action** To use operational improvements, implementation projects as teaching/ research resources. Apply internal research findings in a UHI setting: behaviour change, governance at sites/properties/buildings.
- 

Sustainability Strategy was approved by UHI Court on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2023



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## Sustainability Strategy

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Thank you to all staff who helped in the production of this document.

Published by UHI, a limited company registered in Scotland No.148203.  
Registered Scottish Charity No. SC022228. Registered office: 12b Ness Walk, Inverness, IV3 5SQ, Scotland.

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