

Governing for Net Zero: Sustainability at the University of Glasgow

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1. Introduction

The University of Glasgow (UofG) is a large, research-intensive institution with a substantial environmental footprint: a complex estate, energy-intensive laboratories, extensive business travel, significant commuting and large procurement budgets. At the same time, it has a strong civic and global role as an anchor institution and a producer of knowledge, technologies and graduates.

This dual role means UofG must address two questions:

1. **How do we reduce the University's direct and indirect environmental impacts, particularly greenhouse gas emissions?**
2. **How do we govern the institution so that sustainability and net-zero objectives are integrated into strategic, financial and academic decisions, rather than treated as optional extras?**

This handout uses UofG as a case study in **sustainability governance**, focusing on its net-zero pathway, governance architecture and key operational levers.

2. Why Sustainability Governance Matters in Universities

Universities are often viewed positively in public debates on climate and sustainability, but structurally they are:

- **Large emitters:** through heating and powering estates, running labs, travel, commuting, and supply chains.
- **Influential institutions:** shaping public policy, innovation, and the values and practices of graduates.

Simply announcing a “net-zero” commitment does not guarantee change. The central argument of this lecture is:

Net-zero targets are only credible when backed by governance that links ambition, resources, accountability and day-to-day decisions.

For UofG, this means:

- Treating climate change as a **strategic risk**, comparable to financial or reputational risk.

- Creating a **transparent structure of responsibility** from the governing body down to operational units.
- Embedding sustainability into **policies, risk registers, reporting cycles and capital planning**, not only into isolated projects.

3. Glasgow’s Sustainability Profile and Early Leadership

3.1 External Recognition and Rankings

UofG is consistently recognised as a leading global institution for sustainability and SDG impact, for example through:

- Strong performance in the **Times Higher Education Impact Rankings** (focused on the UN Sustainable Development Goals).
- Strong performance in the **QS Sustainability Rankings**, which look beyond environment to social impact and governance.

These rankings signal that UofG’s efforts are not confined to a small “green” office, but cut across teaching, research, operations and partnerships.

3.2 Early Commitments

UofG’s governance trajectory builds on several early, visible commitments:

- **Fossil-fuel divestment** – an early and prominent pledge to remove fossil fuel holdings from the endowment.
- **Alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** – a public commitment to integrate SDGs across institutional strategy.

These steps raised expectations among students, staff and external partners, and created political space for more systematic governance reforms.

4. Climate Emergency and the Glasgow Green Strategy

4.1 2019 Climate Emergency Declaration

In 2019, UofG became the **first university in Scotland** to declare a **climate emergency**. This act:

- Framed climate change explicitly as a **strategic institutional risk**.
- Mandated the development of a focused **climate change strategy and action plan**.

- Required climate considerations to be integrated into **capital planning, risk management and policy review**.

This moved climate change from being mainly an academic topic to a core lens for institutional governance.

4.2 Glasgow Green: Response to the Climate Emergency

Glasgow Green is UofG's climate change strategy and action plan. Its key features:

- **Headline commitment:** achieving **net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2030**.
- **Institution-wide scope:** covering estate, operations, travel, procurement, research and education.
- **Development via consultation:** involving staff and student engagement and alignment with existing University Strategy.

The strategy is structured around **five pillars** (wording may vary across documents):

1. **Community engagement and empowerment**
2. **Promoting efficiency and reducing waste**
3. **Governance and policy**
4. **Continuous improvement and innovation**
5. **Partnerships and resilience**

These pillars are reflected in the governance and operational arrangements described below.

5. Carbon Management and the Net-Zero Pathway

5.1 Carbon Footprint Baseline

A robust **Carbon Management Plan (CMP)** underpins the net-zero commitment. It:

- Establishes a **baseline** for greenhouse gas emissions, including:
 - **Scope 1:** Direct fuel use (e.g. gas and oil for heating).
 - **Scope 2:** Purchased electricity.
 - **Scope 3:** Business travel, commuting, waste, elements of procurement and other indirect emissions.
- Quantifies the contributions of key categories, such as:

- Energy use in buildings.
- **Business travel** (e.g. flights, rail).
- **Commuting** by staff and students.
- **Waste** and some supply-chain emissions.

5.2 Pathway and Targets

The CMP models **business-as-usual vs intervention** scenarios and defines:

- **Interim targets** (e.g. emissions by mid-2020s).
- A **2030/31 footprint target** consistent with the 2030 net-zero ambition (with residual emissions to be addressed via carefully selected offsetting).

The plan emphasises:

- **Deep reductions** via improved building fabric, low-carbon heating, energy efficiency, behaviour change and procurement reforms.
- **Phased, high-integrity offsetting** for residual emissions that cannot yet be eliminated, with attention to quality and justice.

6. Governance Architecture

UofG has established a **multi-layered governance structure** to ensure climate and sustainability are embedded in formal decision-making.

6.1 University Court and Estates & Sustainability Committee (ESC)

- **University Court** is the **governing body** of the University. It:
 - Approves strategies such as Glasgow Green.
 - Scrutinises progress toward net-zero and broader sustainability objectives.
 - Owns the high-level **risk registers**, including climate-related risks.
- The **Estates & Sustainability Committee (ESC)** is a **Court sub-committee** that:
 - Oversees both the **Estate Strategy** and the **Sustainability Strategy**.
 - Reviews and recommends major **capital investments**, ensuring sustainability criteria are integrated.
 - Monitors estate and sustainability **risk registers** and performance indicators.

ESC provides the key governance link between top-level commitments and practical estate and infrastructure decisions.

6.2 Sustainability Strategy & Delivery Board (SSDB)

Reporting into senior management structures, the **SSDB**:

- Is appointed by the **Senior Management Group (SMG)**.
- Oversees the **development and delivery** of the sustainability strategy, particularly Glasgow Green and the CMP.
- **Shapes and recommends policies**, approves delivery plans, and ensures alignment with overall University Strategy.
- Coordinates **engagement and communications** and reports back to SMG and Court (via ESC).

Where Court and ESC ask, “Are we on track and credible?”, SSDB asks, “What exactly are we doing, on what timeline, and how does it fit together?”

6.3 Sustainability Working Group (SWG) / Carbon Governance

The **Sustainability Working Group** operates at a more operational level. Its membership typically includes:

- Senior management (e.g. Chief Operating Officer).
- **College and University Services sustainability champions.**
- Representatives from **Estates and Procurement.**
- **Student** representatives.
- Sustainability and communications officers.

Its functions:

- Translate strategy into **actions and workplans** across Colleges and services.
- Track **implementation of the climate strategy and CMP.**
- Identify barriers and opportunities, feeding back to higher-level bodies.
- Help raise awareness and build capacity among staff and students.

6.4 Estates Sustainability Programme Board (ESPB)

The **ESPB** focuses on **delivery**, especially for the estate and infrastructure:

- Chaired by the **Executive Director of Estates** – ensuring sustainability sits at the core of the estates function.

- Builds a **portfolio of decarbonisation programmes and projects** (e.g. building retrofits, low-carbon heat, renewables).
- Uses metrics such as “**cost per tonne of carbon saved**” over project lifetimes to **prioritise** investments.
- Aligns the decarbonisation portfolio with the **capital plan** and recommends projects through formal capital governance routes.
- Monitors programme-level **risks, costs and delivery timelines**.

This is where carbon ambitions meet financial constraints, technical complexity and operational realities.

6.5 Centre for Sustainable Solutions (CfSS)

The **Centre for Sustainable Solutions** is the key **enabling centre** that connects governance, research, education and civic engagement:

- Offers expertise and support to integrate sustainability into **courses and MOOCs**.
- Builds **communities of practice** for educators and professional services.
- Leads or supports major **city–university projects** such as **GALLANT/Thriving Glasgow**, turning the city into a “living lab”.
- Acts as a bridge between **operational challenges** and **research capacity**.

7. Policy Instruments and Management Systems

Beyond formal committees, UofG’s sustainability governance relies on a set of **policy instruments** and integration mechanisms:

7.1 Strategy and Core Plans

- **Glasgow Green** – climate strategy and action plan.
- **Carbon Management Plan** – baseline, targets, pathway and modelling.
- **Sustainability Annual Report** – public reporting on performance, including emissions, travel, waste and energy.

7.2 Thematic Policies and Frameworks

Various thematic policies are aligned to Glasgow Green and integrated into broader University risk and planning cycles. These include:

- **Energy and carbon** policies.

- **Waste and circular economy** policies (e.g. waste reduction, recycling targets).
- **Biodiversity and green space** policies.
- **Food, catering and procurement** policies (e.g. sourcing, food waste).
- **Travel policies**, such as Guidance for Sustainable Business Travel.

7.3 Integration Into Management Systems

Sustainability and climate considerations are increasingly embedded in:

- **Risk management:** climate-related risks appear in institutional and committee risk registers.
- **Annual planning and performance reporting:** sustainability indicators and actions feature in planning templates and reports.
- **Policy development:** new or revised policies typically include sections on environmental and sustainability impacts.

The aim is to move from sustainability as a discrete domain to sustainability as a **lens** applied across standard management processes.

8. Operational Levers

8.1 Procurement and Supply Chains

Procurement is a powerful lever because a large share of emissions is **Scope 3**:

- The procurement strategy adopts a **whole-life, whole-value** perspective, considering economic, environmental and social impacts.
- UofG participates in external initiatives that monitor labour conditions and ethical standards in supply chains.
- The **Head of Procurement** is represented in sustainability governance structures, ensuring purchasing decisions align with net-zero and SDG commitments.

8.2 Business Travel and Commuting

Business travel and commuting are significant and challenging sources of emissions:

- UofG has issued **Guidance for Sustainable Business Travel** and related policies, encouraging:
 - Avoiding unnecessary travel.
 - Shifting to **lower-carbon modes** (e.g. rail instead of short-haul flights).

- Considering remote participation where appropriate.
- The Sustainability Annual Report tracks **business travel and commuting emissions over time**, showing:
 - A sharp **COVID-19-related drop**.
 - A **post-pandemic rebound**, with recent values often above the 2018/19 baseline.

This illustrates that policy and governance tools are necessary but not sufficient; **cultural change, incentives and alternative models of international collaboration** are also needed.

8.3 Estate, Energy and Campus Development

UofG is heavily investing in its estate, including the **Western Campus** development. Governance in this area aims to:

- Ensure new and refurbished buildings meet high environmental **design standards** (e.g. energy performance, low-carbon heating, active travel infrastructure, biodiversity).
- Integrate climate considerations from the **earliest stages** of project development, rather than as late “bolt-ons”.
- Manage tensions between:
 - The desire for **modern, high-quality facilities** and
 - The need to **reduce overall emissions** and avoid excessive floor-area growth.

The ESPB and ESC, guided by Glasgow Green and the CMP, play central roles here.

8.4 Labs, Students and Staff Engagement

Change on the ground is essential:

- **Labs** are particularly energy-intensive. Programmes such as **LEAF** and **S-Labs** help labs reduce energy, water and waste, often with measurable savings.
- **Student-led initiatives**, Green Impact teams and internships translate institutional targets into local projects.
- Staff engagement includes **training, toolkits and communities of practice**, especially around incorporating sustainability into teaching.

Governance sets direction and resources; these programmes translate them into concrete practices.

8.5 City and Regional Partnerships

As an **anchor institution**, UofG collaborates with the city and region on:

- **Climate resilience** and adaptation (flooding, heat, etc.).
- **Sustainable transport** and active travel infrastructure.
- **Nature-based solutions** and potential offsetting/compensation projects.
- **GALLANT / Thriving Glasgow** – a “doughnut economics”-inspired initiative using Glasgow as a living lab for a healthy, equitable, sustainable city.

These partnerships require governance bodies to consider both **internal footprint** and **civic responsibilities**.

9. Governance Challenges and Tensions

Despite progress, several challenges remain:

9.1 Ambition vs Capacity

- Net-zero by **2030** is highly ambitious for a growing, research-intensive institution.
- Internal audits and risk assessments have highlighted gaps in:
 - Detailed operational planning.
 - Data quality and monitoring.
 - Prioritisation mechanisms for competing projects.
- Capacity in key teams (e.g. estates, sustainability) can be stretched.

Governance here is about **sequencing, prioritisation and resourcing**: deciding what *not* to do, as well as what to do.

9.2 Estates, Scope 3 and Offsetting

- **Estates development** can increase construction emissions and floor area, creating tension with emission-reduction needs.
- **Scope 3 emissions** (travel, commuting, procurement) are structurally hard to control and depend on behaviours and external actors.
- **Offsetting** raises questions around:
 - How much to rely on it.
 - Integrity of offset projects.

- Fairness and communication with the university community.

These require ongoing governance conversation, not one-off decisions.

10. Lessons for Governing for Net Zero

From the UofG case, several design principles emerge:

1. Treat sustainability as a core strategic objective

Give it status comparable to research quality, financial health and student experience.

2. Create clear vertical accountability

A chain from governing body (Court), through key committees (ESC), strategy boards (SSDB), working groups (SWG, ESPB) and down to local champions.

3. Match targets with pathways and programmes

Net-zero targets must be accompanied by:

- Quantified pathways (CMP).
- Funded portfolios of projects and programmes.
- Clear responsibilities and timelines.

4. Establish enabling centres

Centres like CfSS connect governance and operations with research and education, and help catalyse cultural and curricular change.

5. Use big levers

Embed sustainability in:

- Procurement.
- Business travel and collaborations.
- Estate strategy and capital planning.
- Risk and performance reporting.

6. Use rankings and external assessments as tools, not only trophies

They can provide leverage and focus, but should feed into internal learning and honest reflection, not just marketing.

12/1/2026