University of Sheffield

Environmental Sustainability Strategy

2025–2030

Contents

Executive summary

Higher education has a vital role in responding to global sustainability challenges.

In 2020 we published our first five-year sustainability strategy, setting out commitments to reduce carbon across all scopes. Five years on, we have refreshed the strategy to reflect progress made and the reflect the progress we have made as well as the sector-wide challenges that have affected delivery in some areas. This updated plan provides a clear, actionable roadmap for the next five years. It focuses on achievable goals that embed sustainability in our campus, operations and culture, aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and is underpinned by a long-term vision, measurable targets and themed approaches – each with its own aims and commitments.

Executive summary

Our vision for sustainability at Sheffield

We will deliver life-enhancing research, innovation and education in the most sustainable, socially responsible and financially resilient way we can. Our work will help shape a fairer, more sustainable future – on our campus, in our city and across the world.

Progress so far

Since our 2018/19 baseline we have reduced Scope 1 and 2 emissions by 42%. We will continue to report progress openly and present a short set of headline metrics alongside this summary.

Targets at a glance

This strategy updates our carbon targets using a science-based approach, guided by three principles: prioritise real reductions over offsetting; focus on emissions we can most influence (especially within Scope 3); and balance carbon reduction with our broader educational and social mission.

- **Scopes 1 & 2:**
  80% reduction by 2030 and net zero by 2038 (2018/19 baseline).
- **Scope 3:**
  Net zero by 2045, with 2030 checkpoints across high-impact sources (purchasing and capital projects, travel, laboratories, digital and food) to keep progress measurable and on track.

Approach and structure

Our approach to sustainability is based around thematic areas of delivery. Our governance structure includes an accountable lead for each of these themes, ensuring that our strategy will be embedded and implemented throughout our faculties, schools and departments.

This document presents a consistent pattern to these themes; a short background to set context, a vision to describe success, and a set of commitments, with Scope 3 checkpoints to 2030 where relevant.

Executive summary

One University approach
Embeds sustainability in everyday decisions across Schools and Professional Services; sets clear expectations, helpful defaults and practical tools; progress is driven locally through communities of practice and a live action plan.

Research culture
Plans and conducts research with resource-aware methods, whole-life thinking and transparent reporting; quality is maintained while environmental and social impacts are reduced through training and better data.

Research spaces
Runs laboratories and facilities with LEAF as standard; encourages equipment sharing and right-sizing; reduces single-use consumables, supported by metering and utilisation data to target improvements.

Education
Integrates Education for Sustainable Development across programmes; links learning with campus and community via living-lab projects, placements and co-curricular opportunities shaped with students.

Using space
Aligns the estate to actual need; improves quality and utilisation; reduces running costs and emissions, supported by better scheduling, policy and data.

Built environment
Applies a retrofit-first approach; tracks embodied carbon from the outset; aligns new builds to recognised net zero standards while embedding circular economy principles.

Energy and water
Introduces an Energy Policy; expands smart metering and controls; sequences efficiency and electrification projects to remove fossil fuels from campus; improves water efficiency and resilience through targeted measures.

Nature and public realm
Integrates nature-positive design, sustainable drainage and habitat creation into campus improvements so environmental quality and wellbeing rise together.

Travel and transport
Makes active and public transport the simplest everyday choice; manages business travel through clear expectations and budgets; transitions the University fleet to electric, guided by reliable and timely data.

Purchasing, waste and circularity
Strengthens sustainability requirements in frameworks; increases spend with assured suppliers; normalises reuse of furniture, IT and construction materials; contracts focus on whole-life value.

IT and digital
Consolidates devices to a one-device norm; extends lifecycles and optimises infrastructure; uses shared carbon accounting with clear reuse and disposal routes.

Food
Shifts menus toward plant-forward choices; reduces single-use items; works with suppliers on product standards and transparency, aligning food operations with health and climate goals.

Governance, engagement and reporting
Sets clear ownership and open reporting; engages staff, students and external stakeholders, including through recognised accreditation schemes; uses a standardised reporting framework across all scopes; publishes annual progress and tracks quarterly KPIs; 2030 scope checkpoints provide interim guardrails and inform course correction.

Looking ahead

This strategy sets a practical path for the next five years. We will continue to learn, adapt and be transparent – updating our approach as evidence changes and reporting annually on progress against our targets and checkpoints. Our aim is consistent: to cut carbon quickly and fairly while supporting outstanding research, excellent education and our civic mission.

Executive summary

Introduction from the Vice-Chancellor

This strategy sets out how we will reduce our environmental impact while sustaining our core purpose: excellent research, education and civic contribution. It is a practical plan for the next five years, informed by what we have learned and by the realities facing higher education.

I want to thank colleagues, students, partners and alumni for the steady work already underway - from improving the way we use energy and space to rethinking how we travel, purchase and run laboratories. These efforts are cumulative. Small changes in day-to-day practice, alongside targeted investments, will help us make consistent progress.

Sustainability is also a way to build community around our shared ambitions. Working towards a common goal brings people together across disciplines, roles and campuses. It creates opportunities to share ideas, learn from one another and take pride in improvements that are visible in our buildings, laboratories and public spaces. The partnerships we form with our Students' Union, with our city and with regional organisations are part of this, helping us align practical action on campus with benefits for Sheffield and South Yorkshire.

Since publishing our first five-year sustainability strategy in 2020 we have made significant progress on our sustainability journey, not least in making large reductions to our Scope 1 and 2 emissions. But we have also encountered obstacles that have affected the pace of delivery. This updated strategy reflects this experience. It focuses on actions we can take now, sets out where we will need to consider trade-offs, and recognises the financial context in which the University and the wider sector are operating.

Our approach is straightforward. We will prioritise real carbon reductions and act where our choices have the greatest effect. Interim checkpoints to 2030 will help us stay on course and we will report our progress each year so our community can see what is changing and why.

Sustainability touches every part of University life. The plan brings together our work on research culture and research spaces, education, the estate and built environment, energy and water, purchasing and waste, food, digital, and how we engage with our city and region. It is designed to be used across Schools and Professional Services so that improvements become part of everyday practice.

There will be difficult decisions. We will take them carefully, guided by evidence and always taking a holistic view of our responsibilities to students, staff and partners. The purpose is clear: to reduce our environmental impact in a way that supports our academic mission and benefits our community.

Professor Koen Lamberts
President and Vice-Chancellor

Executive summary

Introduction from our Institutional Lead for Sustainability

This strategy has been co-created by more than a hundred colleagues and students from across our University.

It reflects the power of collaboration and shared purpose – people coming together from different disciplines, roles and perspectives to shape how we can act for a more sustainable future. I am extremely grateful for the thought, care and commitment that so many have brought to this process.

At its heart, environmental sustainability is about justice. It is about how we live alongside one another and the planet that sustains us – ensuring that future generations can enjoy the same opportunities that we do today. Universities have a responsibility to lead by example: through our teaching, our research, and the way we operate every day.

This strategy provides a clear framework for how we will do that. We have strengthened our governance to ensure accountability and transparency in our decisions, and we are deepening engagement across our community so that everyone can play their part in shaping and delivering ambitious change.

What gives me the greatest optimism is the way this work has already brought people together. When we connect research, teaching and professional expertise around a shared goal, we not only accelerate progress on sustainability – we also build a stronger, fairer and more connected university community.

Our task now is to turn this shared ambition into action. By working together with integrity and purpose, we can ensure that the University of Sheffield continues to make a meaningful contribution to a more just and sustainable world.

Professor Ruth Blakeley
Vice-President and Head of Faculty of Social Sciences
Institutional Lead for Sustainability

Vision and values

We will ensure our University core mission of delivering life-enhancing research, innovation and education is achieved in the most sustainable way possible. We will deliver research and education that shape the world we live in to find a sustainable future for all.

At the University of Sheffield, our sustainability decisions are made with a clear commitment to balancing environmental, social and economic factors. While this strategy focuses on environmental sustainability, we recognise that environmental action must be grounded in principles of fairness, justice and inclusion. Our choices reflect not only what is technically possible, but also what is socially responsible and financially sustainable – especially in a context where the future of our sector and the livelihoods it supports are under pressure.

Although this is an environmental sustainability strategy, our approach to education takes a broader view. We are committed to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) – preparing students to contribute to a just transition that addresses both the climate crisis and wider social challenges. That is why we include UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 – Quality Education as a central aim of this strategy, in recognition of our core mission as a university.

Vision and values

Our values

In this strategy, we focus on the environmental and biosphere-related UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- **SDG 6** – Clean Water and Sanitation
- **SDG 7** – Affordable and Clean Energy
- **SDG 12** – Responsible Consumption and Production
- **SDG 13** – Climate Action
- **SDG 14** – Life Below Water
- **SDG 15** – Life on Land
- **SDG 4** – Quality Education

Other SDGs – including those related to poverty, gender equality, health, work, and strong institutions – are critical to a just and inclusive society. These are addressed through other University strategies and policies, including those on equality, diversity and inclusion, civic engagement, research, education, and internationalisation.

We are clear that sustainability must be approached holistically, and that our wider activities, through research, teaching, partnerships and governance, contribute meaningfully to all 17 SDGs. This strategy supports those broader efforts by embedding environmental sustainability across our campus, operations and culture.

Carbon footprint

In our 2020–2025 sustainability strategy, the University of Sheffield committed to ambitious carbon reduction targets, aiming for a 60% reduction in Scope 1 and 2 emissions by 2025 and reaching net zero by 2030, based on a 2018/19 baseline. For Scope 3 emissions, we committed to a 30% reduction by 2025, 75% by 2030, and net zero by 2038.

These goals reflected the urgency of the climate crisis and our determination to lead by example. They also pushed us to accelerate our understanding of institutional carbon emissions and begin transforming how we operate.

However, five years on, and despite achieving a 42% reduction in Scope 1 and 2 emissions from our 2018/19 baseline, it is clear we will not meet these original targets – and we believe it is important to be transparent about why, and what we have learned along the way.

Since setting those goals, the world has changed in significant ways. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted almost every aspect of university life, from teaching and research to estates and procurement. While emissions temporarily dropped, long-term planning and delivery of decarbonisation initiatives stalled. This was followed by sharp global inflation in materials, energy, and construction costs – driven first by the pandemic and then by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These market shocks have made it significantly harder to deliver large-scale infrastructure projects within the original timeframes and budgets.

More recently, the UK higher education sector has come under growing financial pressure. Like many universities, we now face difficult decisions about how to invest resources responsibly while also protecting jobs, student experience, and our wider social commitments. In this context, we believe it would be irresponsible to commit to levels of spending that might compromise the University's long-term financial sustainability, or the wellbeing of our community.

Carbon footprint

During this time, we've made significant progress in understanding the true scale and complexity of our carbon footprint. Our work on a detailed campus decarbonisation plan has given us greater clarity about what is possible and when. For Scope 3 emissions, we now have a much clearer picture of the breadth and depth of our impact, including more robust data on supply chains, travel, IT, food, and waste. When we set our original Scope 3 targets, we did so without this level of insight, and we now recognise that some assumptions were overly optimistic.

This 2025–2030 strategy presents a revised set of carbon targets that are still ambitious, but that are grounded in detailed evidence and a realistic understanding of cost, timescales, and institutional capacity. We remain fully committed to achieving net zero and to holding ourselves accountable for progress.

Setting our original targets was essential. Without them, we would not have driven the progress of the last five years: the creation of a carbon footprint baseline, the investment in decarbonisation planning, or the integration of sustainability into procurement, buildings, and travel. These targets gave us a foundation, a direction, and a reason to act.

We are still learning. Sustainability is not a fixed destination but a dynamic process, shaped by context, constraints, and continuous improvement. This strategy reflects the next stage in our journey, and we will remain open, transparent, and accountable as we move forward.

Carbon footprint

Understanding Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions

Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are categorised by the GHG Protocol into three scopes to help organisations account for and manage their carbon footprint:

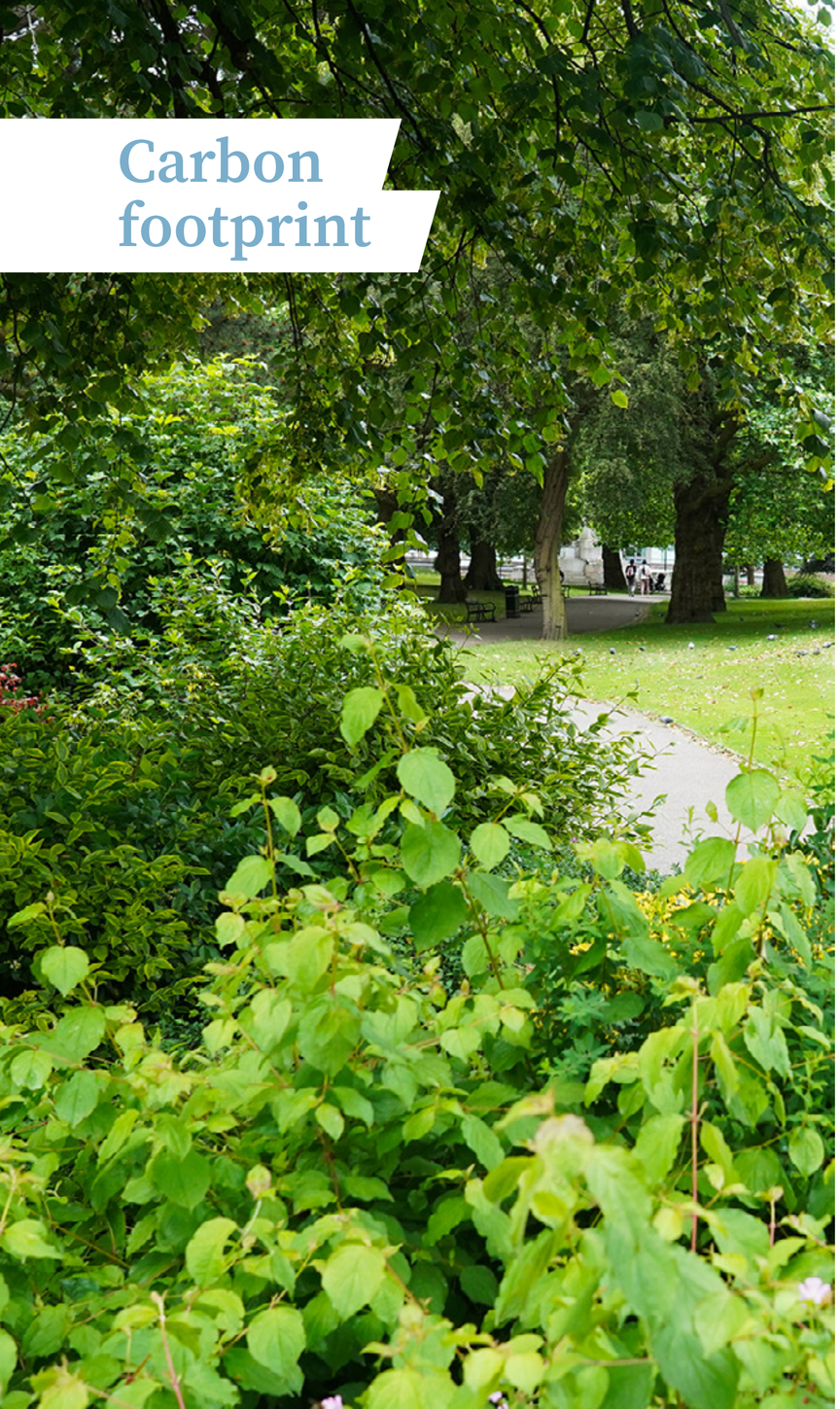
Scope 1 – direct emissions:
Emissions from sources that are owned or controlled by the University. This includes on-site fuel combustion (e.g. gas boilers), fleet vehicles, and emissions from chemical use in laboratories.

Scope 2 – indirect emissions from energy:
Emissions from the generation of purchased electricity, steam, heating and cooling that is consumed by the University but occurs off-site.

Scope 3 – all other indirect emissions:
These occur in the value chain of the organisation and are not owned or directly controlled by it. For many universities, including Sheffield, Scope 3 emissions account for around 90% of the total carbon footprint. Scope 3 emissions are further divided into 15 distinct categories:

1. **Purchased goods and services** – Emissions from the production of goods and services acquired by the University (e.g. furniture, food, outsourced services).
2. **Capital goods** – Emissions from the production of capital assets such as buildings, lab equipment, and IT infrastructure.
3. **Fuel- and energy-related activities** – Emissions from upstream processes like fuel extraction, production and transportation (not included in Scope 1 or 2).
4. **Upstream transportation and distribution** – Emissions from the transport and distribution of products purchased by the University.
5. **Waste generated in operations** – Emissions from disposal and treatment of waste generated by University operations.
6. **Business travel** – Emissions from flights, trains, taxis and other travel undertaken for University business.
7. **Employee commuting** – Emissions from daily staff and student commuting.
8. **Upstream leased assets** – Emissions from assets leased by the University that are not included in Scope 1 or 2.
9. **Downstream transportation and distribution** – Emissions from the distribution of products sold by the University (less relevant in a HE context).
10. **Processing of sold products** – Emissions from the processing of intermediate products sold to other entities.
11. **Use of sold products** – Emissions from the use of goods or services sold by the University.
12. **End-of-life treatment of sold products** – Emissions from disposal of products sold.
13. **Downstream leased assets** – Emissions from assets owned and leased to other entities (if applicable).
14. **Franchises** – Emissions from franchises operating under the University's brand (if applicable).
15. **Investments** – Emissions related to the University's investments and endowments.

Not all categories are equally material to every institution. For example, the University of Sheffield has identified major sources of Scope 3 emissions in categories such as **procurement (category 1), capital projects (category 2), business travel (category 6), commuting (category 7), food (categories 1 and potentially 3 or 11), and IT equipment and cloud services (category 1 or 2).**



Carbon footprint

What does “net zero” mean?

Net zero is an ambitious and comprehensive approach to carbon neutrality, where the amount of greenhouse gases emitted is balanced with the amount removed from the atmosphere. It requires reductions in carbon emissions to a level that is as low as reasonably practicable (ALARP), with only residual, hard-to-abate emissions being eligible for offsetting in the future.

The Science Based Targets Initiative defines net zero as being a reduction of at least 90% of greenhouse gas emissions, compared to a baseline, with the remainder being offset.

Reducing before offsetting

Offsetting – the practice of compensating for emissions by funding an equivalent reduction or removal elsewhere – can play a role in long-term decarbonisation. However, it is not a substitute for reducing emissions at source. Many schemes, particularly nature-based ones such as tree planting or soil carbon storage, offer delayed or uncertain benefits. Their permanence, additionality and verification can be difficult to assess, and the quality of schemes varies widely.

Our approach is guided by the ALARP principle – As Low As Reasonably Practicable – meaning we prioritise real, measurable emissions reductions wherever feasible, affordable, and consistent with our core mission. We will only consider offsetting once emissions have been reduced to a minimum and a small volume of unavoidable emissions remains.

Before committing institutional funds to any offsetting scheme, we will require clear evidence that it meets high standards of environmental integrity, transparency, and social equity. This includes assurance that the scheme is additional, permanent, independently verified, and not subject to double counting. We will follow evolving government guidance and industry best practice, and expect schemes to deliver clear benefits for local communities and ecosystems, with appropriate governance and consent.

Until such schemes are identified and meet these standards, our focus will remain on direct reductions: cutting energy use, transitioning to low-carbon technologies, reducing waste, and enabling behaviour change. We will continue to monitor the offsetting landscape and explore credible options with trusted partners – but only when we are confident they represent genuine environmental benefit and responsible use of institutional resources.

Carbon footprint

Carbon Targets – Scopes 1 and 2

Following extensive modelling and planning as part of our campus decarbonisation work, we are setting new, science-led targets for reducing our Scope 1 and 2 emissions. These targets are:

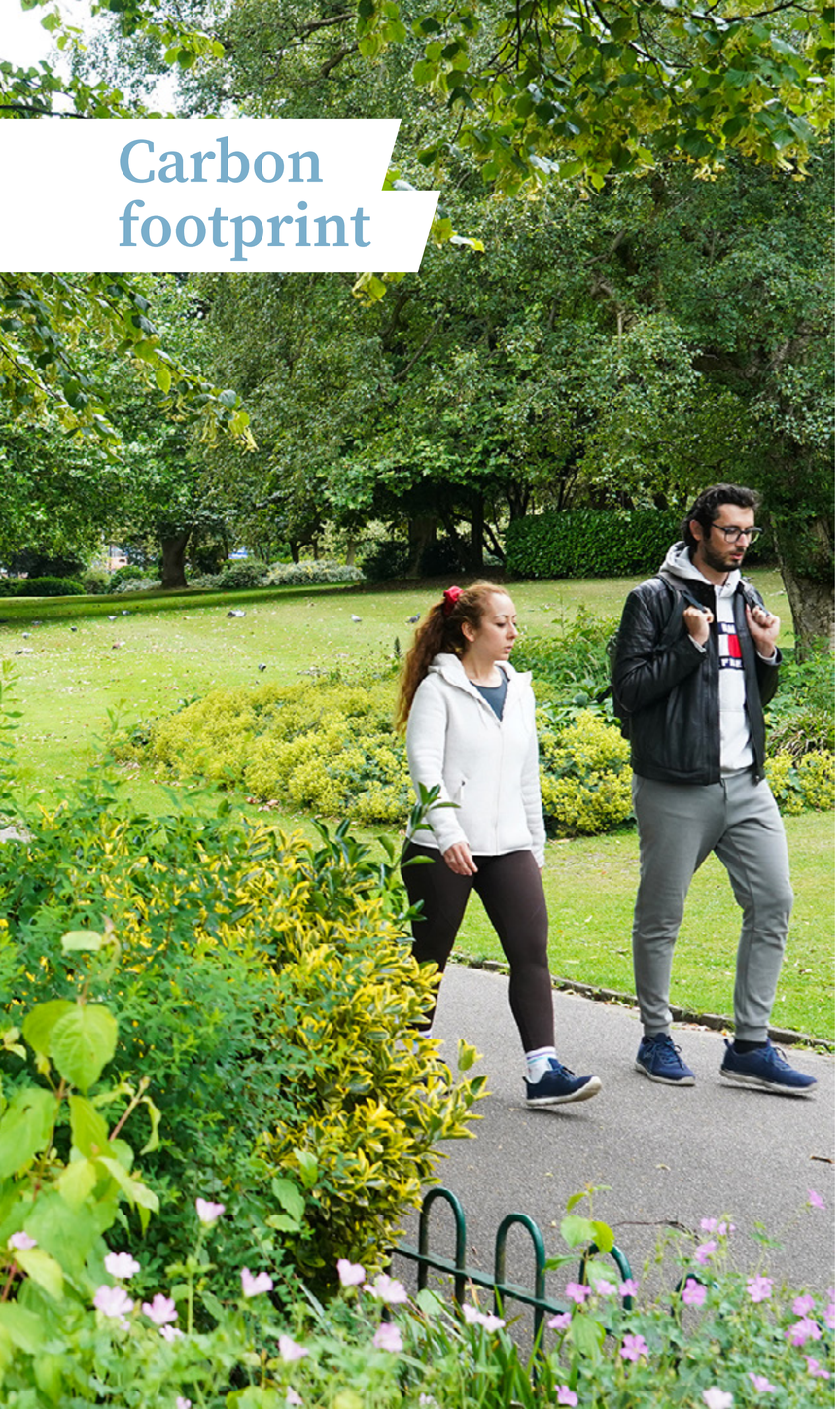
- **80% reduction by 2030**
- **>90% reduction by 2035**
- **Net zero by 2038**
  (from a 2018/19 baseline)

These new targets are built on robust data and a detailed understanding of the University's energy use, infrastructure, and estate characteristics. They are directly informed by our Campus Decarbonisation Plan, which outlines a viable path to significantly reduce fossil fuel use across our heating systems, electricity consumption, and on-site energy generation. More details of this plan are included in the Energy and Utilities section of this strategy.

Crucially, these targets are aligned with science-based decarbonisation pathways. The Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research has developed carbon budgets for local areas, including Sheffield, that define how quickly emissions must fall to be consistent with the Paris Agreement and the UK's legal climate commitments. Our new targets match the pace and scale of decarbonisation recommended by the Tyndall Centre for large institutions in Sheffield and South Yorkshire.

As we approach a 90% reduction by 2035, we will take stock of our remaining emissions. These will likely stem from our most technically or financially challenging buildings and systems. At that point, we may determine that the capital investment required to fully eliminate our remaining emissions would have diminishing environmental returns and could be better used to deliver wider social or sustainability benefits. This is particularly important given that every £1 we spend on reducing Scope 1 and 2 emissions through capital projects adds carbon to our Scope 3 footprint, through construction materials, supply chains, and embodied emissions. As such, our decision-making must consider not only cost and feasibility, but also the whole-system impact of further investment.

Our commitment remains firm: to make rapid and deep cuts in carbon emissions from energy and heat, to continue investing in long-term solutions, and to be transparent about the trade-offs and decisions we face as we deliver net zero in practice.



Carbon footprint

Carbon Targets – Scope 3

Scope 3 emissions account for approximately 90% of the University of Sheffield's total carbon footprint. In 2020, we committed to achieving net zero for Scope 3 by 2038. At the time, the scale and sources of our Scope 3 emissions were not fully understood – a challenge faced across the higher education sector. In the five years since, we have significantly improved our knowledge, data, and modelling of these emissions, enabling us to set more realistic, focused, and actionable targets.

As a result, our new Scope 3 target is:

- **Net zero Scope 3 emissions by 2045,** with interim checkpoints at 2030

This target reflects both our deepened understanding of where Scope 3 emissions occur and our growing insight into which areas the University can meaningfully influence. Unlike Scope 1 and 2 emissions, many Scope 3 emissions originate upstream or downstream in our supply chains, within business travel, or in services and infrastructure that we do not directly control. These emissions are often difficult to measure, let alone eliminate, and their reduction often requires coordinated efforts with external suppliers, partners, and policy change.

Our revised approach is guided by three core principles:

1. **Prioritising real carbon reduction over offsetting**
   Offsetting plays a role in long-term carbon strategies, but we believe investment in direct reductions will achieve faster and more meaningful environmental outcomes. Offsetting should not be used prematurely or as a substitute for action.
2. **Focusing on influenceable emissions**
   We will direct our efforts toward emissions we can meaningfully control or influence, such as procurement decisions, staff travel, IT equipment, food provision, and capital projects. We will not let harder-to-control areas become an excuse for inaction.
3. **Balancing carbon reduction with our broader social and educational mission**
   Reducing emissions is essential, but it must not come at the expense of the University's core purpose. For example, reducing international student numbers would lower our Scope 3 emissions, but it would also undermine our financial stability, reduce the diversity of our learning community, and limit our contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We must consider the full sustainability impact of our decisions.

We are therefore moving to a system of focus-area-specific targets, each with their own metrics and timelines. We have also established 2030 checkpoints for each focus area, to assess progress and allow us to course-correct if needed. This enables a more adaptive, transparent, and evidence-led approach with increased accountability and focus for areas of University activity that have a particularly large Scope 3 impact.

This updated target complements the region's net zero goal of 2038 and reflects our continued ambition to lead on sustainability in higher education.

It acknowledges the complexity of Scope 3 emissions, but it also reflects our growing confidence in addressing them.

The chapters of this strategy set out the detailed actions required to deliver progress in each focus area. This journey will not be simple, but by focusing on what we can influence, enabling behavioural and cultural shifts, and staying aligned to our broader purpose, we can reduce our global impact and continue contributing meaningfully to a sustainable future.

The next page outlines our Scope 3 targets and checkpoints for all areas. They can also be found on the relevant pages throughout this document.

Area	Final Target	2030 Checkpoint	Target detail
Business Travel	Annual budget of less than 8,000 tonnes	Achieving under budget.	Business travel will always be required, but must be undertaken only when necessary and in the most sustainable way available. By 2030, we must remain within an annual carbon budget of 8,000 tonnes CO2e. This target will be reviewed in 2030, informed by future opportunities to reduce emissions further.
Commuting	In line with overall net zero year of 2045.	Emissions to be 70% reduced from 2018/19 levels, and proportion of staff travelling by car to be reduced to 20% of 2018/19 levels.	Commuting habits have changed since 2018/19 and our targets reflect this shift. By 2030, commuting emissions should be reduced by 70%, and staff car use cut to 20% of the 2018/19 baseline. Our ultimate goal is net zero by 2045.
Capital Projects	Five-yearly budget of less than 25,000 tonnes.	Achieving under budget.	Construction cannot currently be zero carbon, but must be planned with clear carbon limits. A five-year budget of 25,000 tonnes CO2e will ensure we minimise emissions from capital projects. This will be reviewed in 2030.
Capital Asset Management	Five-yearly budget to be defined by 2028 through a standard calculation and reporting of embodied carbon for all UoS built environment projects	Baseline measured and budget agreed by 2028. Achieving under budget by 2030.	All capital asset projects must stay within a defined carbon budget. By 2028, we will calculate and report embodied carbon across relevant projects and set a five-year budget. From 2030, we will track and stay within this limit.
Food	Shift to lower carbon menus in line with overall net zero year of 2048.	ALARP achieved.	Our food offering must shift to lower carbon menus, aligning with our net zero goal of 2048 without alienating our community. By 2030, our provision should be ALARP (As Low As Reasonably Practicable).
IT Equipment and Services	In line with overall net zero year of 2045.	30% reduced from 2018/19 (to be confirmed within next 12 months)	IT equipment and services have a significant carbon footprint but also plays a key role in decarbonisation. By 2030, emissions must be reduced by 30% from 2018/19 (subject to confirmation), with a long-term aim of net zero by 2045.
Regular purchases	ALARP by 2038.	75% reduced from 2018/19.	Regular purchases, such as furniture and textiles must meet their own carbon targets. By 2030, we aim for a 75% reduction from 2018/19. By 2038, these should be ALARP, reaching net zero by 2045.
Other supply chain	In line with overall net zero year.	Identify further breakdowns.	We will identify specific categories within our wider supply chain that require targets . By 2030, we will develop further breakdowns, with all areas reaching net zero by 2045.
Lab consumables	In line with overall net zero year.	30% reduced from 2018/19. (approx in line with 10% from 23/24)	Our laboratories rely on consumables, but these must be reduced. We aim for a 30% cut by 2030 (based on a 2018/19 baseline), reaching net zero by 2045.
Lab capital equipment	Five-yearly budget, to be defined by 2030.	Achieving under budget.	Large research equipment purchases are essential, but must be planned within a five-yearly carbon budget. This will be set and monitored to ensure we remain under budget by 2030 and beyond.
Investments	To be defined by 2030	Measured and reported.	Investments carry carbon impacts that must be measured and reported. By 2030, we will track and disclose these emissions and develop a route to net zero by 2045.

One University Approach

This is our second five-year environmental sustainability strategy; it reflects what we've learned so far – and what we know we need to do next.

The strategy has been shaped by the people who know the University, and the sustainability challenges we face, best: our expert staff and students. Through a series of working groups focused on key sustainability themes, over 100 colleagues and students from across the University have come together to share knowledge, challenge assumptions, and help shape an ambitious but achievable path forward. It's been a collaborative, expert-led process that reflects the complexity and breadth of sustainability across every aspect of university life.

This strategy applies to the whole University – every faculty, school, department, service and site. Sustainability isn't the job of one team or one part of the organisation; it's something we take on together. All staff and students are expected to support our sustainability ambitions through the conscious choices they make as part of their work, studies, decisions and day-to-day behaviours on campus.

It also means helping to foster a culture in which sustainable practices are normal, visible and supported – whether through formal roles, peer networks or local initiatives. By embedding sustainable behaviours into everyday routines and responsibilities, the University community can collectively reduce our environmental impact and help deliver the goals of this strategy.

As a university rooted in Sheffield, our work has meaning beyond our walls. Sheffield is a green, outdoor city, shaped by its landscape and proud of its heritage. The environment is part of who we are – and that's reflected in how our University approaches sustainability. Our researchers are tackling major environmental and social challenges across all technology readiness levels, from fundamental science to real-world solutions. We work with partners across the city, region and planet to pilot innovations, support communities, and deliver impact that lasts.

One University Approach

Framework for change

Achieving the aims of this sustainability strategy will rely not just on technical solutions or infrastructure investment, but on enabling and supporting behaviour change – across all themes and throughout the University community.

Many of the actions outlined in this strategy depend on people making different choices: how they travel, what they buy, how they use space and resources, or how they influence others. Universities in this regard differ from other workplaces and employers; they often offer the autonomy, creativity, and social networks that make them ideally placed to lead cultural and behavioural transformation.

Over the 2020–2025 period, we launched a range of initiatives aimed at influencing behaviour – from reusable container schemes and training modules to incentive-based campaigns. While these had some success, they were not always underpinned by a consistent behaviour change framework.

Factors such as timing, communication, convenience, infrastructure, and perceived relevance were not always fully considered. This has limited the reach, effectiveness, or sustainability of some interventions.

Key lessons from our first strategy include the need for a more systematic use of established behaviour change models, stronger alignment between initiatives and institutional goals, better support networks for those leading local action, and a clearer understanding of what enables or hinders sustainable behaviours in context.

This strategy addresses those gaps by embedding behaviour change frameworks across the University, establishing communities of practice, launching a structured engagement mechanism, and equipping staff and students with the tools and confidence to lead change. Through this, we aim to create lasting shifts in campus culture and make sustainable behaviours part of everyday life.

One University Approach

Vision

We will build a culture where sustainable choices are the easy choices, applying behaviour change and social practice theory to focus on the highest-impact behaviours and the interventions most likely to shift them. Through structured communities of practice, practical training, clear tools and guidance, and alignment of communications, infrastructure and incentives, we will enable staff and students to co-design, test and refine solutions. We will recognise and celebrate those who lead change so that sustainable behaviours become visible, rewarding and embedded across everyday university life.

Targets and commitments

FROM 2025

Align communications, infrastructure, and incentives to make sustainable choices easier, more visible, and more rewarding. Track uptake and outcomes.

FROM 2025

Integrate behaviour change frameworks (e.g. Behaviour Change Wheel, EAST, Change Points) into the planning and delivery of all major sustainability initiatives from 2025 onwards.

FROM 2025

Embed structured evaluation processes to monitor and reflect on the success of behavioural interventions annually.

FROM 2025

Provide Schools and Faculties with individual impact reports to help them develop local sustainability action plans and better integrate sustainability into the University's strategic planning process.

MID 2026

Deliver behaviour change training to all Faculty and School sustainability leads and operational services by mid-2026.

LATE 2026

Establish and support cross-functional communities of practice by the end of 2026, focused on key behavioural drivers across campus (e.g. travel, energy use, procurement).

Research and Innovation

Delivering world-class research is a core part of the University of Sheffield's Vision. Our research aims to address global challenges and create knowledge that makes a difference.

As a major research institution, the environmental impact of how we conduct research must be part of our sustainability strategy. But we should also recognise that expending resources – whether energy or consumables – to undertake research which may pay back many times its environmental investment, is part of the core operations of the University.

The University is already taking action: as a signatory to the UKRI Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice, we are committed to transforming research culture and infrastructure to minimise environmental harm.

Building on initiatives like the appointment of a dedicated Sustainable Lab Manager and sustainability leads within each School, we are committed to embedding sustainability across every aspect of our research activities. Our ambition is to align world-leading research excellence with environmental leadership, inspiring a new model for sustainable research across higher education.

This section of the strategy addresses two aspects of our research sustainability; how we do research and the spaces we do it in.

Research and Innovation

Sustainable research culture

At the University of Sheffield, we are committed to embedding sustainability into the culture and practice of research across the entire institution. This means creating the conditions in which environmental responsibility is considered at every stage of the research lifecycle – from project design and funding applications to procurement, delivery, collaboration and dissemination.

Delivering world-class research must go hand-in-hand with reducing its environmental impact, particularly when much of the research we undertake is itself focused on global environmental challenges. We are working to shift the culture of research so that sustainability is seen not as a separate objective, but as a core part of academic excellence. This includes building awareness, setting expectations, and providing tools and support to help researchers make informed decisions about the resources they use, the equipment they share, and the travel they undertake.

We are exploring new models with partner institutions to enable shared use of specialist equipment and infrastructure, reducing duplication and lowering emissions while improving access and efficiency. We are also aligning internal governance, incentives and processes to ensure that sustainability is actively considered in decision-making – not as an afterthought, but as a standard part of how research is planned and conducted.

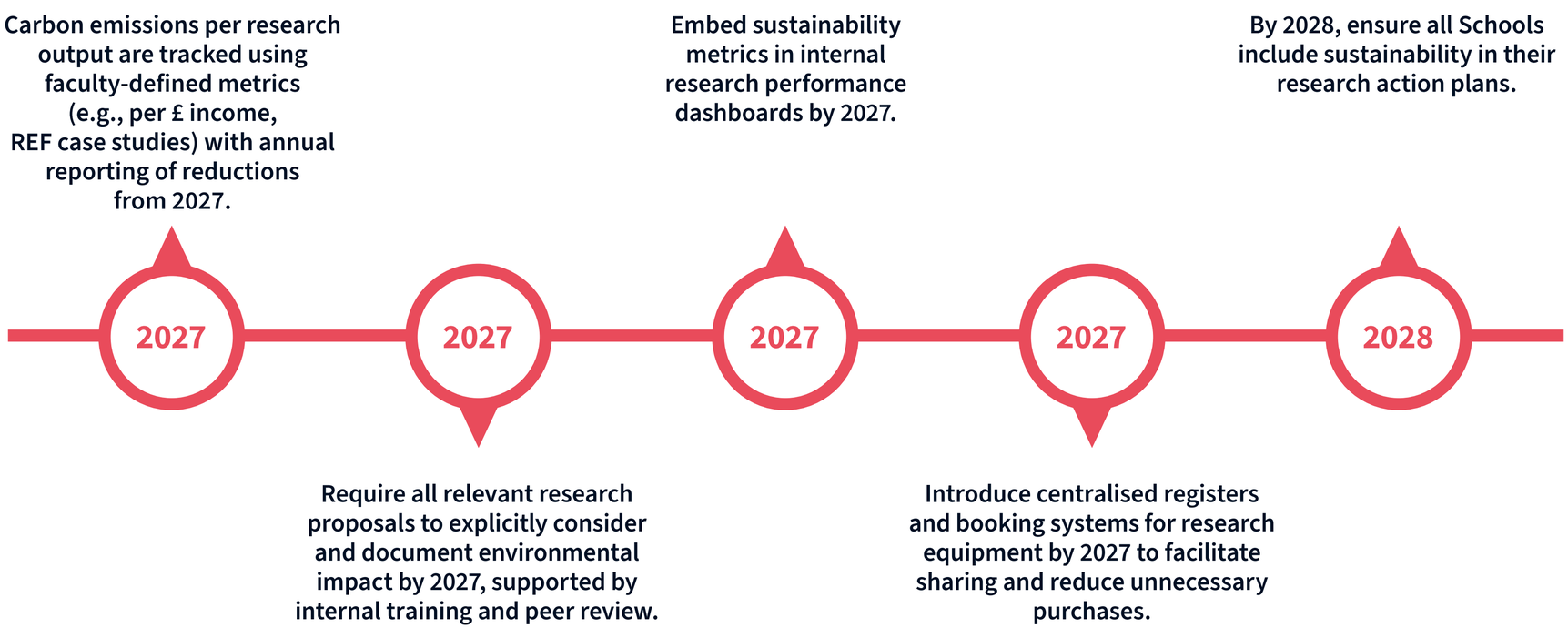
As a signatory to the UKRI Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice, we recognise our responsibility to lead by example. Building a sustainable research culture is not about restricting academic freedom; it is about enabling innovation and discovery in ways that respect planetary limits and contribute to a just and resilient future.

Research and Innovation

Vision

We will ensure environmental responsibility is a standard part of academic excellence so that sustainability is actively considered at every stage of the research lifecycle. Researchers will be supported to assess environmental, social and economic impacts in proposals and practice, to share equipment and infrastructure to minimise duplication, and to reduce carbon per unit of output by lowering consumption of energy, water and materials. By embedding the principles of the UKRI Concordat into governance and culture, we will align world-class research with environmental leadership.

Targets and commitments



Research and Innovation

Research spaces

The spaces we conduct research in are many and varied, ranging from wet and dry laboratories, to IT workrooms and manufacturing workshops. These spaces are essential for their disciplines, but they are among the most resource- and energy-intensive parts of the University estate. For example, wet labs, which occupy just 7% of our non-residential estate, account for more than half (52%) of the University's total carbon emissions, largely due to their high energy consumption, intensive use of materials, and production of hazardous and non-hazardous waste.

In 2018–19, operational costs for Sheffield's wet labs exceeded £25 million, with carbon emissions totalling an estimated 63,000 tonnes CO_2e. The majority of this footprint came not from direct energy use, but from the embedded emissions associated with the purchase of consumables and materials, highlighting the critical importance of reducing resource use and embracing a circular economy approach.

The reliance on single-use plastics is especially acute: laboratories worldwide were estimated to have generated 5.5 million tonnes of plastic waste in a single year, much of which is not recycled due to its potentially hazardous nature. In our laboratories, plastic use is often driven by requirements for sterility and convenience, but there is growing evidence that alternatives – including reusables and improved washing and sterilisation methods – can deliver both environmental and cost savings.

Although sustainable laboratory initiatives are gaining momentum nationally and internationally, practical guidance and benchmarking have historically been limited. At Sheffield, promising steps have been made: the introduction of a Sustainable Labs Manager, the rollout of the LEAF (Laboratory Efficiency Assessment Framework) accreditation, and growing engagement at the School and Faculty level are laying the foundations for change. However, real progress will require embedding sustainability deeply into the culture, design, and operation of every laboratory.

By making laboratories a focal point for our environmental leadership, we can significantly reduce our carbon footprint, lower running costs, and strengthen the resilience and reputation of our research environment.

Research and Innovation

Vision

We will transform laboratories, workshops and other research spaces into exemplars of efficient, low-impact environments that are flexible, shared and resource-wise. We will reduce dependency on single-use items by shifting to reusable and lower-impact alternatives, embed sustainability accreditation across labs, and foster a culture in which all users champion good environmental practice as part of excellent research.

Targets and commitments

2026 — Enrol 100% of suitable laboratories in the LEAF framework, or a suitable alternative, by 2027.

2026 — Establish faculty-level laboratory sustainability champions and communities of practice by 2026.

2027 — Achieve Bronze accreditation in 100% of LEAF-registered labs by 2028, and Silver by 2030.

2028 — Eliminate water-cooled equipment from University laboratories by 2028, except where no viable alternative exists

2029 — Set a five-yearly carbon budget for large research equipment.

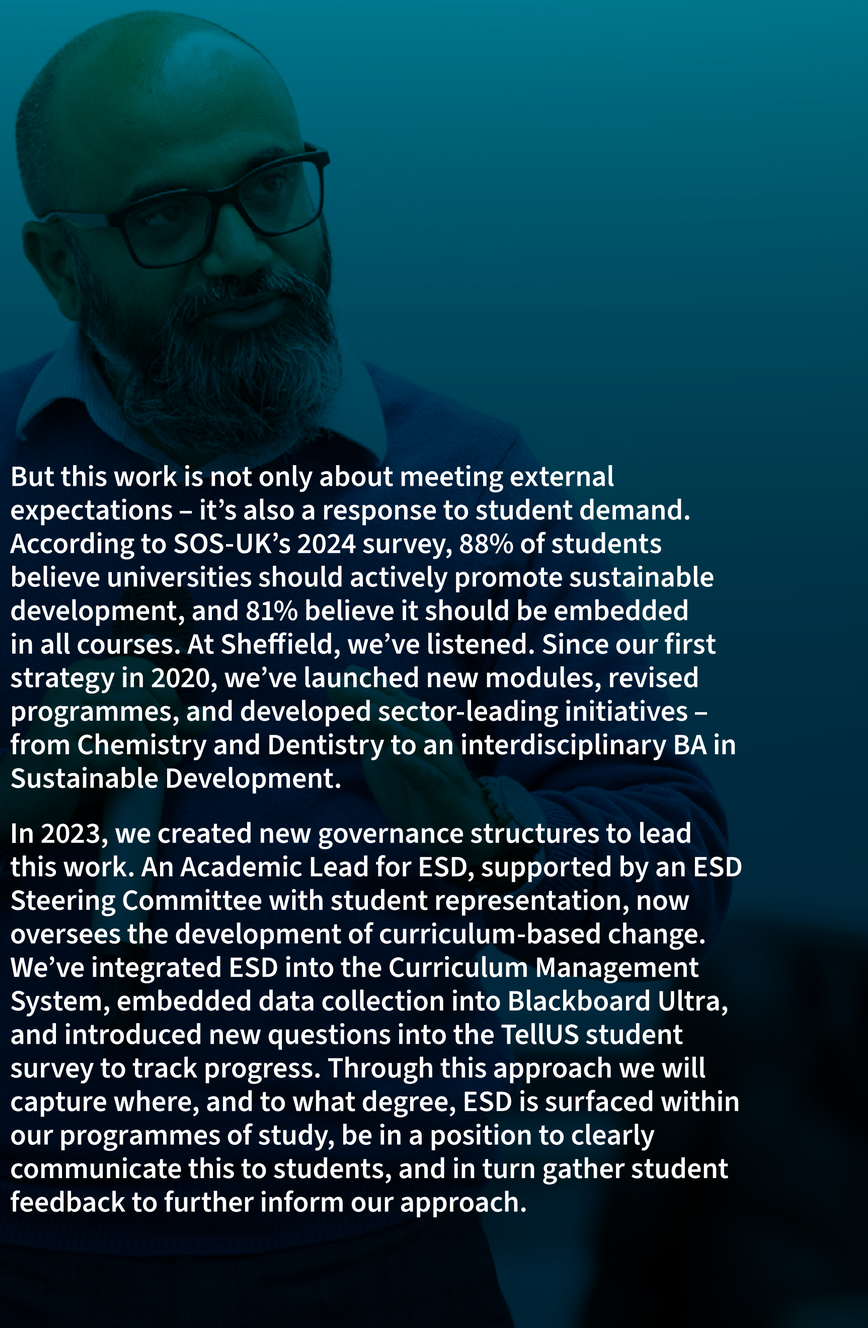
2029 — Install shared washing and sterilisation facilities for reusable labware in each faculty by 2029.

2030 — Reduce the purchase of laboratory consumables by 30% compared to a 2018/19 baseline.

2030 — Reduce the volume of single-use plastic consumables by 30% by 2030, measured against a 2023-24 baseline.

Education

Education is one of the most powerful tools we have to shape a just transition to a sustainable future. As a university, our curriculum influences what students learn, how they learn, and the values they carry into the world.



This strategy focuses on embedding Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) at the heart of our programmes – ensuring students graduate with the knowledge, skills, and values to respond to the climate crisis and drive positive change in society.

This work responds to both global frameworks and local priorities. ESD has been recognised internationally since the 1992 UN Earth Summit and is now embedded in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4.7, which calls for all learners to acquire knowledge and skills to support sustainable development. Nationally, the UK Government's 2022 sustainability and climate change strategy places education at the centre of action on climate change and green skills. In higher education, the Quality Assurance Agency and Advance HE have incorporated ESD into benchmark standards, creating new expectations for curriculum development across the sector.

But this work is not only about meeting external expectations – it's also a response to student demand. According to SOS-UK's 2024 survey, 88% of students believe universities should actively promote sustainable development, and 81% believe it should be embedded in all courses. At Sheffield, we've listened. Since our first strategy in 2020, we've launched new modules, revised programmes, and developed sector-leading initiatives – from Chemistry and Dentistry to an interdisciplinary BA in Sustainable Development.

In 2023, we created new governance structures to lead this work. An Academic Lead for ESD, supported by an ESD Steering Committee with student representation, now oversees the development of curriculum-based change. We've integrated ESD into the Curriculum Management System, embedded data collection into Blackboard Ultra, and introduced new questions into the TellUS student survey to track progress. Through this approach we will capture where, and to what degree, ESD is surfaced within our programmes of study, be in a position to clearly communicate this to students, and in turn gather student feedback to further inform our approach.

Education

Considering sustainability as part of our educational offering is not only about what we teach, but how we teach. ESD embraces collaborative, experiential and problem-based learning, delivered in a sustainable manner. This creates a series of considerations for our work, including travel and digital carbon footprints. Field trips and educational travel are important components of the University's teaching, offering students opportunities to engage with global challenges in real-world contexts.

These experiences can be powerful and transformative – but they also have a carbon cost. We recognise the importance of balancing the educational benefits of travel with its environmental impact. Similarly, we recognise the need to minimise the carbon footprint of our approach to digital education. In doing so, we will continue our progression towards multi-use digitally enabled teaching spaces, as opposed to specialist computer rooms. In these spaces students will use either their own device or one provided by the University, with this underpinning a commitment to a single device approach. We will also be mindful of our use of digital tools within the curriculum, educating students not just on how to use tools, but on appropriate consideration of when to use them.

Preparing students for the future also means helping them navigate the world of work. Over the last five years, the University has made significant progress in supporting students to pursue positive-impact careers, of which sustainability is a key aspect – including the launch of the Positive Impact Careers Pathway, targeted events, and greater visibility of sustainability roles within our alumni network. We've also responded to student campaigns calling for more ethical careers practices, and we continue to ensure students can engage critically with the sustainability credentials of potential employers.

While progress has been strong, challenges remain. There is variation in ESD content across programmes, and academic time is stretched across multiple priorities. The targets for 2025–2030 respond to these challenges, setting out a framework that builds on our strengths, supports staff, and keeps students at the centre of our efforts.

Education

Vision

We will equip every student with the knowledge, skills and values to shape a sustainable future by embedding Education for Sustainable Development across all programmes and pedagogy. Student voice will help design and deliver change, staff will be supported with time and tools to teach confidently, and learning will make use of outdoor and experiential opportunities. We will connect education with real-world pathways through sustainable careers and work-based experiences that link disciplines, people and place.

Targets and commitments

2026 — Through work on Student Voice, establish ESD as a standing item on all School and Faculty Student-Staff Committee agendas by 2026.

2026 — Showcase alumni working in sustainability careers in every School by 2026, supported by the development of a Sheffield Connect alumni network focused on positive-impact careers by 2028.

2027 — Showcase sustainable careers within our main Careers Fair, as well as launch a dedicated Sustainable Careers Fair by 2027.

2028 — Schools, through established education governance structures, will embed ESD within the core of all programmes by 2028, as evidenced by our digital curriculum management tools.

2028 — Over the strategy period, increase student agreement with the statement “my course equips me to support sustainability” (measured through the TellUS survey) by: 20% in programmes currently scoring <60%, 10% in those scoring 60-85%, maintain or improve scores >85%.

2028 — Through our future estate, and as part of any major campus developments, seek to support the provision of outdoor teaching and learning spaces, and a single device approach to student computing.

Footprint

The University of Sheffield is committed to taking full responsibility for the environmental footprint of our operations.

Beyond our world-leading research and teaching, how we design, manage and use our campus – our buildings, energy, water, food, travel, IT, procurement and waste – has a profound impact on the planet and our wider community. We recognise that true leadership in sustainability means transforming not only what we teach and discover, but how we live and work every day.

We are working to embed sustainability across all our campus activities, driving down emissions, protecting nature, promoting wellbeing, and supporting positive change at every level. Our operational activities are critical to achieving our net zero targets and to realising our wider vision of becoming a university that is not just sustainable, but restorative – a place that improves the environment for future generations.

Looking ahead, we are creating a long-term plan for our future campus that puts sustainability at its heart. Our campus will celebrate what makes Sheffield distinctive, protecting the heritage and character that connect us to our place and our community. We will make smarter, more efficient use of our estate, creating spaces that are welcoming, flexible and designed for the way we live, study and work today. We will continue to grow our global reputation while ensuring that our campus remains a warm, inclusive and human environment. Nature, daylight, and wellbeing will be central to our designs, creating a healthier, more restorative place for everyone. Above all, we will build spaces that spark collaboration, bring people together and inspire the development of brilliant ideas.

Through bold action across our built environment, utilities, biodiversity, IT systems, supply chains and more, we are reshaping the University of Sheffield into a campus for the future: a campus that supports academic excellence, civic pride and global responsibility.

Footprint: Using space

The way we use physical space has a profound impact on our sustainability performance.

Using space

Buildings and infrastructure account for a significant share of the University of Sheffield's direct and indirect carbon emissions, energy use, water consumption and material waste. Our estate therefore represents one of our greatest opportunities to deliver visible, systemic change in support of our climate goals, social mission and financial resilience.

At over half a million square metres, across more than 430 buildings, our estate is large and complex. But in its current form, it is also inefficient. Compared with our peers in the Russell Group, the University of Sheffield has the seventh largest built estate, despite being only the tenth largest institution by student population. We occupy approximately 17.3m^2 of non-residential space per student full-time equivalent– well above the Russell Group median of 14 m^2. Our estate also provides more office and research space (~10 m^2) per member of staff than many of our peers in the Russell Group. This imbalance results in elevated energy use, maintenance costs and carbon emissions per capita, and reflects a spatial model shaped by historic expansion rather than current and future needs.

These issues are compounded by the current financial and environmental context. The rising cost of energy, the growing urgency of climate action, and increased demand for high-quality, flexible, digitally connected spaces all point in the same direction: we must use less space, and we must use it better. An ambitious but strategic approach to estate rationalisation will not only reduce our carbon footprint but also support long-term institutional sustainability – freeing up resources for investment in decarbonisation, research and teaching, and improving our resilience to economic shocks.

The University's Future Campus Framework provides the principles for this transformation. In conjunction with this strategy, it aims to reshape our campus for a low-carbon, high-impact future. The plan is informed by a comprehensive review of space usage, building conditions and long-term academic and civic requirements.

Just as importantly, the Future Campus Framework puts placemaking and sustainability at its heart. It will guide decisions not only about how much space we need, but how that space supports biodiversity, wellbeing, active travel, water management, and climate resilience. Enhancing public realm, improving walkability, and creating healthier, greener environments are key to making the campus more liveable, equitable and sustainable.

Rethinking how we use our space is not just about efficiency – it is about aligning our physical footprint with our values and mission. The estate should be an expression of the University's commitment to sustainability, inclusion and excellence. Through the Future Campus Framework and this sustainability strategy, we are setting a clear direction: a smaller, better-used, more sustainable campus that enables our community to thrive.

Footprint: Using space

Vision

We will create a smaller, better-used and more sustainable estate that is welcoming, connected and accessible. Our campus will knit together shared, multi-functional spaces and a greener public realm that supports biodiversity, wellbeing and active travel. Decisions about space will be grounded in robust evidence and financial responsibility, improving quality while lowering emissions, energy use and costs.

Targets and commitments

2025

Increase shared and multi-functional space across the estate, ensuring all new builds or major refurbishments prioritise flexibility, adaptability and inclusive design.

2028

By 2028, ensure new space allocations (teaching, research, offices) are supported by robust utilisation data and linked to decarbonisation goals.

2030

By 2030, integrate digital tools (e.g. real-time booking, utilisation dashboards) to improve the transparency and efficiency of space use across campus.

2035

Reduce the estate (not including residential and commercial innovation) by up to 85,000m^2 by 2035, aligned with space efficiency benchmarks and strategic academic needs.

By 2035, achieve a 30% reduction in energy use linked to estate rationalisation, aligned with the University's overall carbon targets.

Footprint: Built environment

The built environment plays a crucial role in the University's sustainability performance. It encompasses the buildings, public realm, and green infrastructure across the estate.

Built environment

This strategy focuses on key areas of environmental sustainability within the built environment: embodied carbon, energy use, circular economy, indoor environmental quality, and the campus public realm.

Our estate spans a broad range of building types and ages – from structures dating back to the 1800s to major developments completed in the 2020s. This diversity presents complex challenges for achieving environmental performance improvements, particularly in areas such as thermal efficiency, embodied carbon, and material use.

The age of construction significantly influences the materials used and the thermal performance of building fabric, meaning there is no single retrofit approach suitable for the entire estate. Of particular note are the 22 listed buildings across campus, which represent approximately 13% of the total building stock (64,701 m^2). Any retrofit interventions affecting their heritage value require listed building consent, potentially limiting the energy efficiency improvements that can be achieved across this subset of the estate.

Despite these challenges, the University has made strong progress in recent years. The University of Sheffield Sustainable Building Standard now includes explicit targets for design, energy consumption and embodied carbon. Looking ahead, these targets will evolve considering the net zero Carbon Buildings Standard, introducing more tailored targets based on building use and whether the project is a refurbishment or new build. The Regenerate tool is now routinely applied to projects over £2 million to assess circularity in building design – a major step forward from previous practice. The next phase of work will focus on quantifying virgin and secondary material use and increasing the extent to which buildings are designed for future deconstruction and reuse.

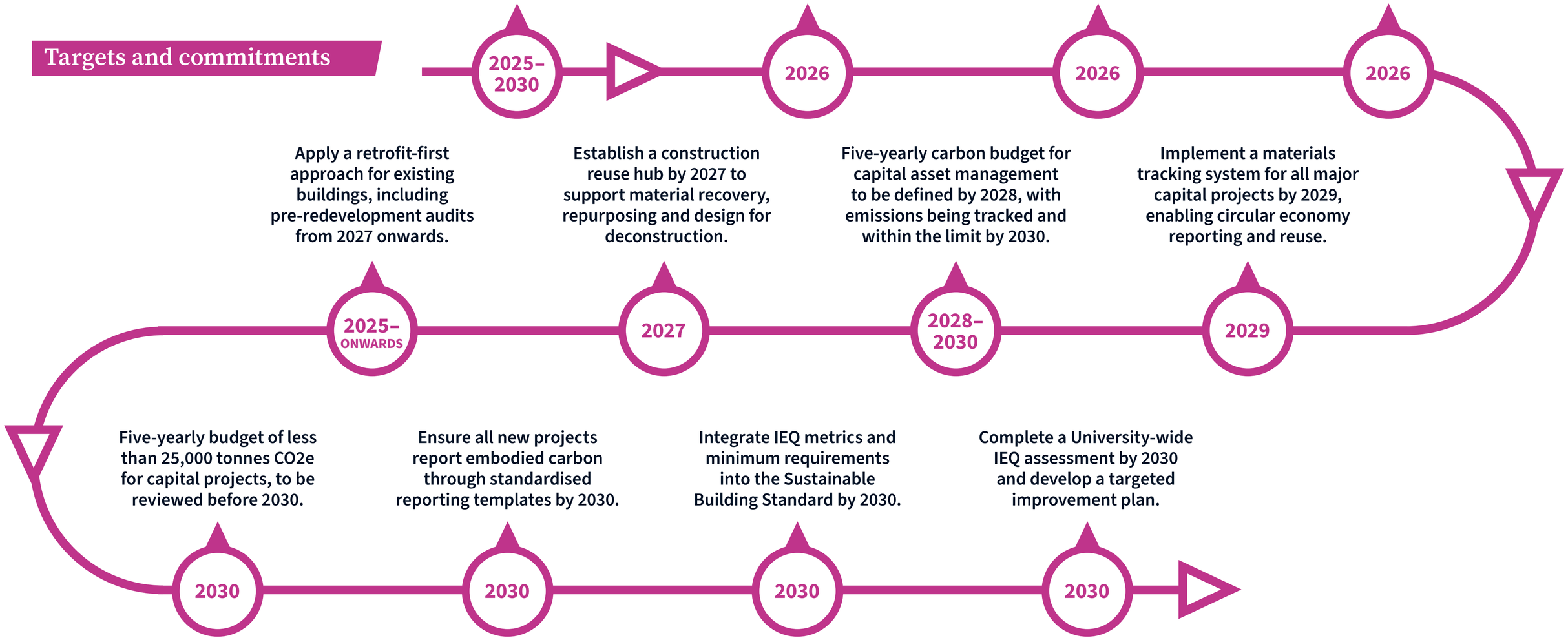
The campus public realm offers significant untapped potential to both demonstrate and deliver sustainability. It can provide valuable ecosystem services – such as supporting biodiversity, reducing surface water runoff, and mitigating the urban heat island effect.

Vision

We will lead in responsible estate management by prioritising retrofit, designing new buildings to the UK net zero Carbon Buildings Standard, and embedding circular economy principles. Healthy, inclusive places with high indoor environmental quality will support wellbeing, learning and productivity, while public realm improvements will connect green infrastructure, reduce runoff and engage our community with nature.

Footprint: Built environment

Targets and commitments



Footprint: Energy and water

Decarbonising our energy use is a core aim for the coming decade as we work to meet our revised Scope 1 and 2 emissions targets.

Energy and water

Since 2018/19, we have seen an overall increase in energy use but a significant reduction in associated carbon emissions – driven primarily by our move to a low-carbon electricity contract that sources exclusively from wind, solar, and hydro power. While this has helped reduce our carbon footprint, it masks an ongoing challenge: the University remains heavily reliant on natural gas, especially for space and water heating, and for powering our on-site Combined Heat and Power (CHP) engine. In addition, approximately 24% of our heating is supplied by Sheffield's District Heating Scheme, which uses energy recovered from the incineration of municipal waste. The carbon accounting for this source is currently under review and may significantly affect our reported emissions.

Energy is delivered to University buildings through a combination of private and third-party infrastructure. However, limitations in this infrastructure – such as capacity constraints in our high-voltage supplies – present challenges for switching to electrified, lower-carbon systems. While we have made modest progress with on-site renewables, including a wind turbine at the Advanced Manufacturing Park and solar PV panels on select buildings, we currently operate no major offsite energy generation.

To address these challenges, the University has developed a detailed Campus Decarbonisation Plan, which sets out a clear, costed route to achieve a 90% reduction in Scope 1 and 2 emissions by 2035, and net zero by 2038. This work is grounded in realistic engineering and financial modelling and forms the foundation for our revised targets. The plan is based on five key principles: reducing reliance on gas boilers through green electricity solutions; moving away from heat derived from incineration; decarbonising the Transformer Energy Centre and expanding the heat network where appropriate; delivering tailored low-carbon heating solutions across the remainder of the estate; and upgrading building fabric and systems to improve efficiency and carbon performance.

Water use is another critical area for action. Climate change, population growth, and changing patterns of rainfall are placing increasing pressure on water resources. To manage our consumption more effectively, we are investing in smart metering and improved monitoring, with a goal of covering at least 60% of our usage with automatic readings. While rainwater harvesting within buildings is often uneconomical and complex, we see opportunities to use harvested water in landscaping and irrigation. We also recognise our responsibility to manage stormwater and reduce the risk of local flooding. In response, we will expand our use of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS) as part of major development projects.

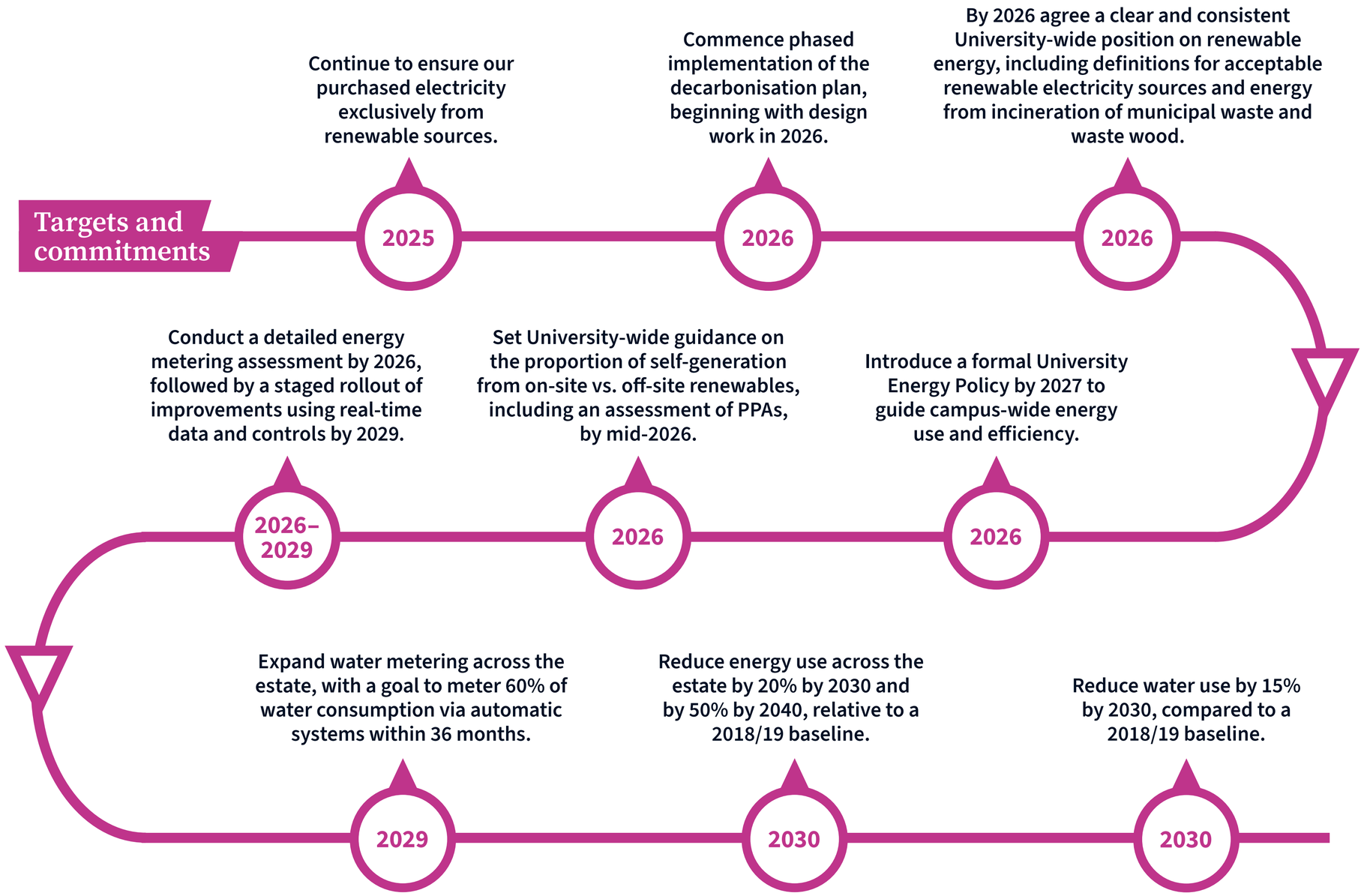
Together, these efforts will help create a more resilient, low-carbon and climate-adapted campus infrastructure that supports our academic mission while responding to the environmental challenges of the 21st century.

Footprint: Energy and water

Vision

We will transition decisively away from fossil fuels to clean, low-carbon and renewable energy, improving resilience and affordability through self-generation and efficiency. We will manage water wisely by enhancing monitoring and controls, improving efficiency, and using sustainable drainage and practical reuse where appropriate. Data-driven decisions, enabled by better metering and management systems, will steer continual improvement across the estate.

Targets and commitments



Footprint: Nature and biodiversity

Biodiversity – the variety of life across all ecosystems, species, and genetic levels – is vital to human wellbeing.

Nature and biodiversity

Our natural systems support clean air and water, food security, climate regulation, and both mental and physical health. Yet biodiversity is under intense pressure globally, and the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

The University of Sheffield recognises its responsibility to protect and enhance biodiversity, both across its estate and through its wider activities, including procurement and operational practices. Since the publication of its first Biodiversity Action Plan in 2013, the University has made considerable progress in addressing its direct impacts on nature. Estate management has become increasingly biodiversity-conscious, with changes made to how land is maintained and enhanced to support local ecosystems.

This work has included the development of management plans for key areas such as Belgrave Woodland and a comprehensive review of grounds maintenance. Grass-cutting frequencies have been reduced in selected areas to allow floristic grasslands to flourish, herbicide use has been significantly limited through the creation of 'no spray' zones and targeted application methods, and nature-based solutions have been adopted – for example, the introduction of grass carp to Endcliffe Pond to control algal blooms without disturbing the surrounding ecosystem. Tree management has also evolved to better support wildlife and long-term health. Deadwood is retained where safe to do so to provide habitats for insects and birds, pruning is scheduled outside of nesting season, and emergency works are subject to ecological checks. These efforts are complemented by carefully selected planting schemes that are not only drought-tolerant and support biodiversity, but also contribute to a distinctive campus identity.

The University has expanded wildflower meadow planting across the main campus, residential areas, playing fields, and satellite sites, and continues to improve the resilience of its green infrastructure. A proactive 2:1 replacement strategy is in place for trees, increasing genetic diversity and supporting greater canopy coverage over time – a key factor in adapting to climate change. We now manage almost 10,400 trees on our estate, an increase of over 250 since 2018.

In 2023, the University published the third edition of its Biodiversity Action Plan. This version includes actions to support the recovery of hedgehogs, a species in national and local decline, and outlines steps to improve ecological connectivity between the University estate and wider green spaces across Sheffield.

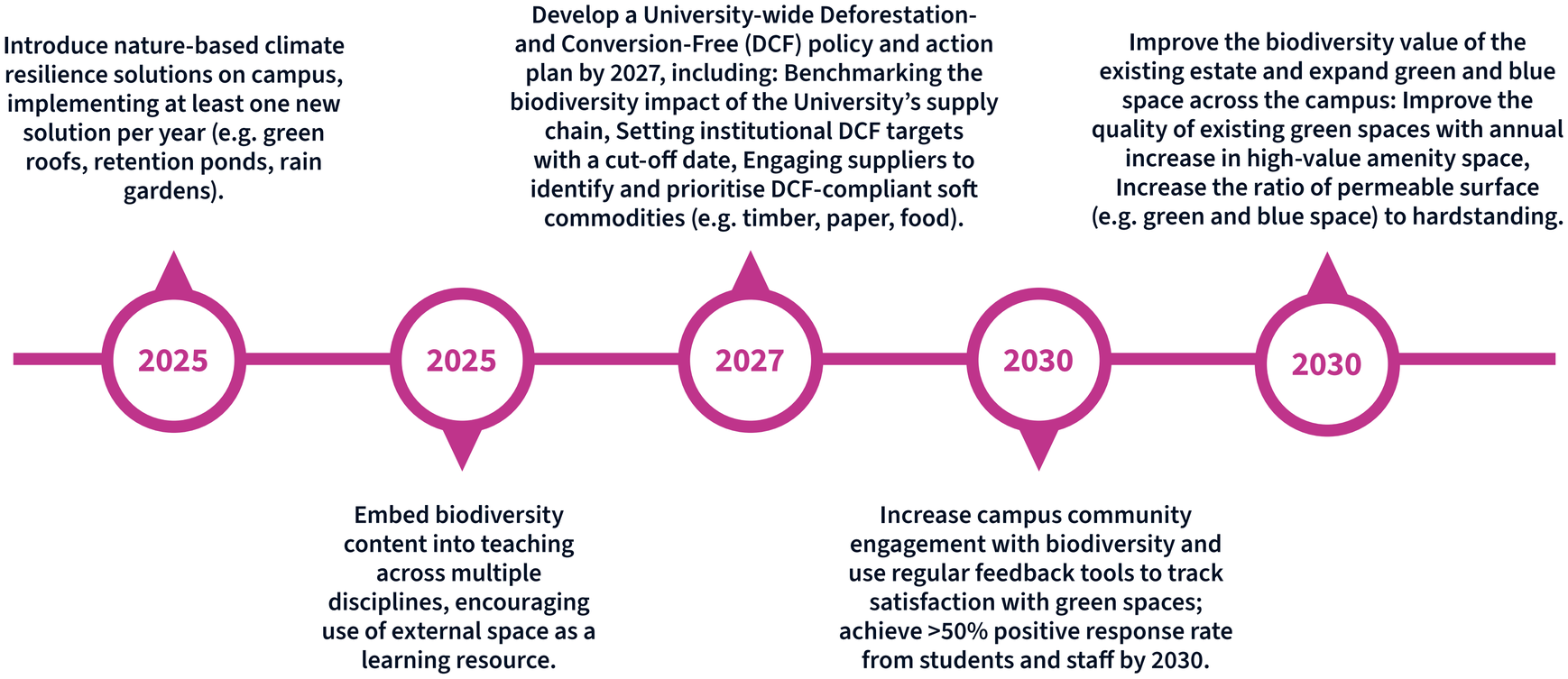
To date, the University's biodiversity strategy has focused on the direct impacts of campus operations. However, it is increasingly clear that our indirect impacts – particularly those arising from procurement and supply chains – are likely to be significantly greater. Addressing these impacts, alongside continuing to improve biodiversity on campus, will be essential as we transition to becoming a truly nature-positive organisation.

Footprint: Nature and biodiversity

Vision

We will be a nature-positive university that protects, restores and enhances biodiversity on and beyond campus. Biodiversity will be integrated into planning, procurement and estate management, with restored habitats and connected green and blue spaces that strengthen ecological networks. We will address indirect impacts through deforestation- and conversion-free sourcing and help students and staff connect with nature as part of daily university life.

Targets and commitments



Footprint: Purchasing, reuse and disposal

The University of Sheffield is committed to embedding circular economy principles into its procurement and waste practices to reduce environmental harm, cut carbon emissions, and promote social value.

Purchasing, reuse and disposal

While waste disposal contributes to the University's environmental footprint, it is the supply chain – particularly purchased goods and services – that represents the single largest source of carbon emissions, accounting for approximately 60% of the University's overall footprint. Reducing these indirect, or Scope 3, emissions is essential to the University's broader sustainability ambitions.

Currently, procurement practices at Sheffield are shaped by decentralised decision-making. While policy and processes are set centrally, nearly half of all University spending – over £138 million in 2023/24 – was made through purchases under £50,000. Small purchases under £5,000 alone accounted for £68 million and are subject to very few controls beyond the discretion of the purchaser. There has historically been little formal monitoring of how consistently central policies are followed across the institution, especially for these smaller, devolved purchases. Our Procurement Policy states that purchases of any size must aim to achieve "value for money", which includes environmental consideration in its definition, but the effect of this policy requirement is not captured.

Larger purchases – those over £50,000 – are reviewed centrally and typically go through a formal tendering process. These tenders include mandatory sustainability criteria, with a minimum of 10% of the scoring based on environmental factors. In 2023/24, this category accounted for £164 million, or 54% of total University spending, meaning a significant portion of the University's purchasing is assessed for its sustainability impact, but that also there is substantial spend where this is not the case.

At the other end of the waste hierarchy, the University sends minimal waste to landfill, and many waste streams are sorted at source for recycling. A significant portion of remaining waste is processed through energy recovery, and only a limited number of additional materials are currently viable for on-site segregation and recycling. As such, the greatest opportunities now lie further up the waste hierarchy – in reducing waste generation altogether and extending the useful life of assets through reuse, repair, and redistribution.

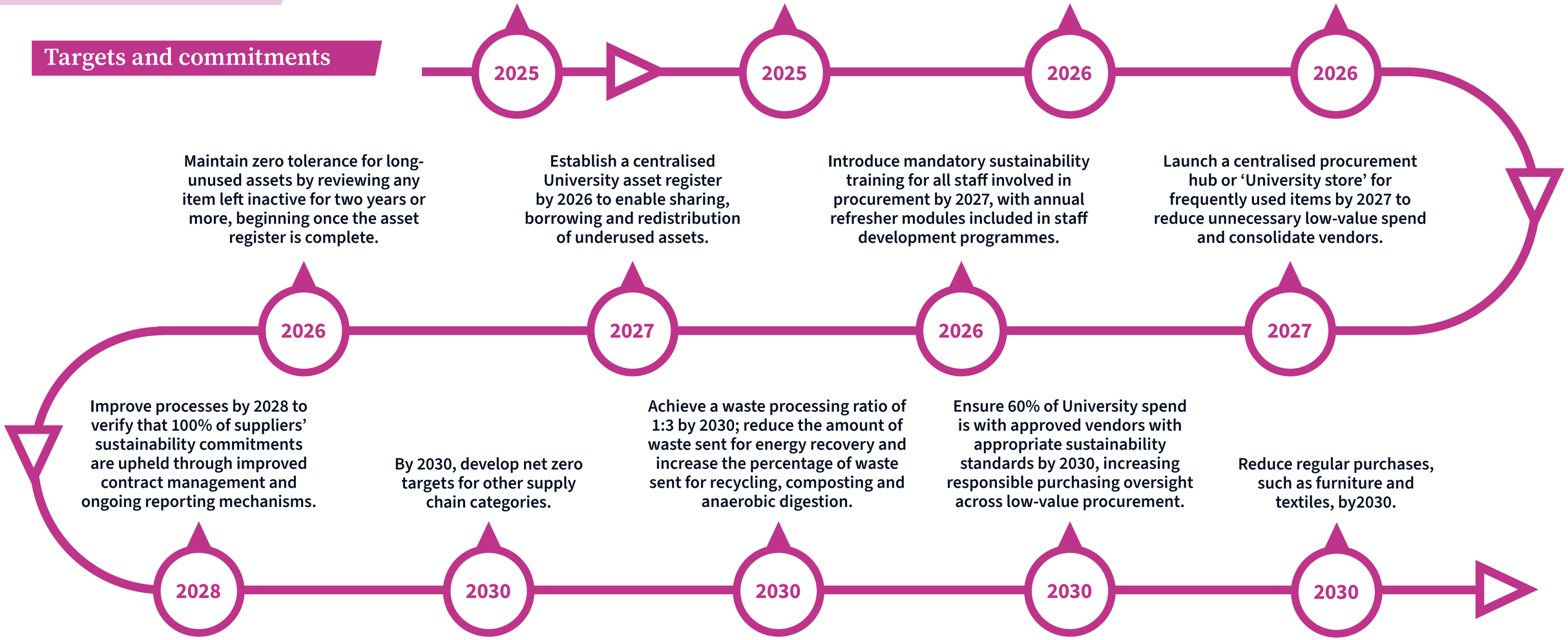
The University's shift toward a circular economy approach – including greater reuse, refurbished goods, and better lifecycle planning can play a transformative role in reducing emissions and material demand. There is also a growing need to understand the social and environmental impacts of our supply chain decisions, including deforestation, habitat loss, and emissions embedded in global production and transport. By leveraging its purchasing power more strategically and applying sustainability principles more consistently, the University can support a more regenerative, just, and low-carbon economy both on campus and in the wider city and region.

Vision

We will embed circular economy thinking into every purchasing and waste decision, making environmental and social impact a core consideration alongside value for money. By building a culture of sharing and stewardship, extending asset life through reuse, repair and refurbishment, and applying sustainability consistently across all spend, we will cut Scope 3 emissions and support a more regenerative, low-carbon economy in Sheffield and beyond.

Footprint: Purchasing, reuse and disposal

Targets and commitments



Footprint: IT

Digital technology plays an essential role in the University's teaching, research, and operations – but it also represents a significant and growing contributor to the institution's environmental impact.

IT

Globally, the IT sector is estimated to account for around 4% of CO_2 emissions, a figure that could rise dramatically without intervention, as more power-hungry processes become ubiquitous. At Sheffield, our IT-related emissions span across direct and indirect sources, including energy use, hardware procurement, software services, and digital waste.

The carbon footprint of our IT estate includes high-performance computing (HPC), such as Stanage and Bessemer, both of which consume substantial amounts of electricity – 200kW and 48kW respectively. In addition to these research-intensive platforms, our networking infrastructure contributes around 255 kW to energy consumption. These systems form a major part of our Scope 2 emissions. The full picture of our energy use is still being established, as the decentralised and complex nature of IT infrastructure across the University makes data collection a challenge.

Beyond energy, a significant portion of the IT estate's carbon impact arises from Scope 3 emissions – the embodied carbon in purchased equipment and services. Devices such as laptops and desktops emit most of their lifetime carbon during manufacture rather than operation, making responsible procurement and asset management critical. In 2023–2024, indirect emissions from our purchase of software licences and subscriptions dominated the IT Services footprint due to the high carbon factor attributed to software development. The calculation, which is under review, takes into account the high power and material demand of the software development industry. We support this industry when we buy their products, even though the products themselves are largely digital.

The University's extensive use of cloud computing also remains difficult to measure accurately. Efforts to cap data storage in services like Google Cloud are underway, but more work is needed to baseline these emissions comprehensively and develop appropriate future methodologies.

The University is also addressing its digital waste and circular economy responsibilities. Asset reuse, equipment lifespan extension, and reduced demand for new hardware will be essential to lowering our impact. The volume and pace of global electronics production pose serious environmental and resource challenges, and we will respond through better design, procurement, and end-of-life practices for IT equipment.

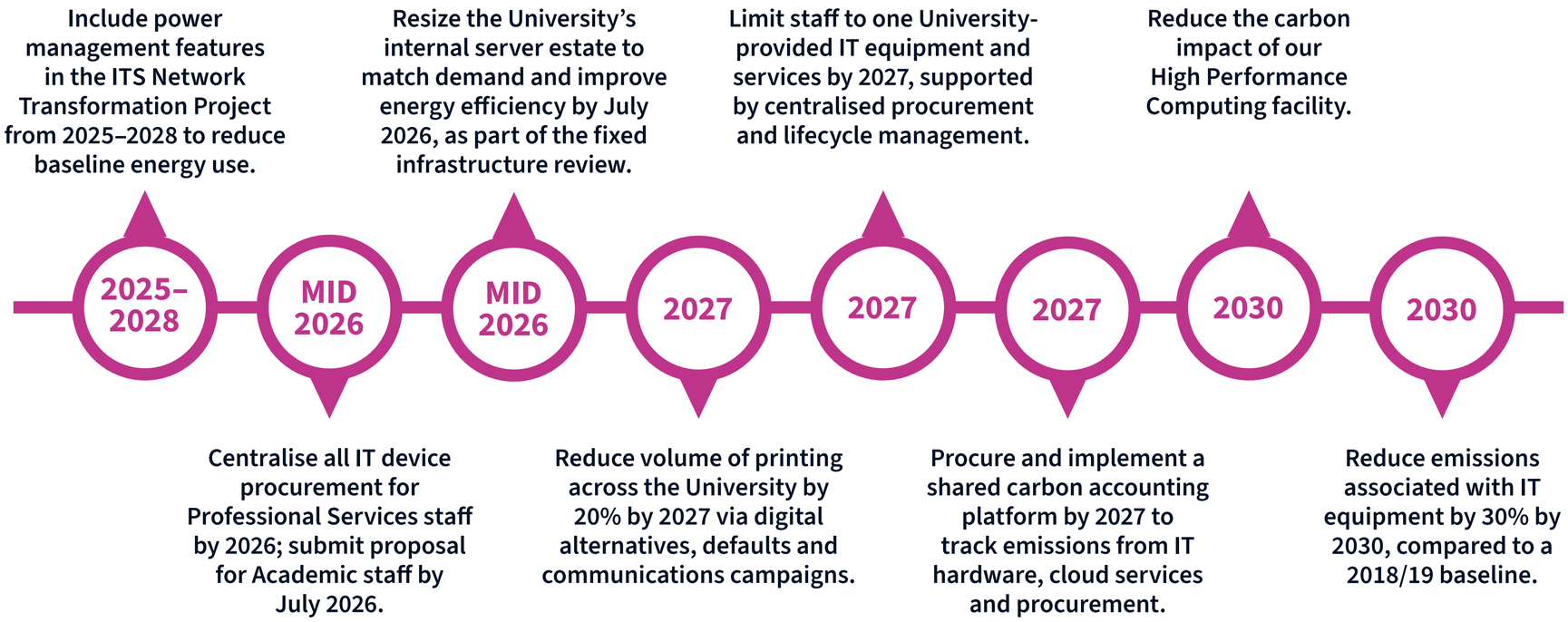
Managing our digital infrastructure sustainably is therefore critical to achieving the University's net zero goals. It requires action across technical systems, procurement processes, and everyday behaviour – ensuring that IT enables, rather than hinders, our transition to a low-carbon future.

Footprint: IT

Vision

We will run a leading sustainable digital estate that reduces emissions across hardware, data centres, cloud and procurement, while enabling lower-carbon digital choices. Smarter design, management and user behaviour will improve energy efficiency and resilience, circular principles will extend equipment life, and stronger monitoring will address Scope 3 impacts and give us the data to make better decisions

Targets and commitments



Footprint: Food

We're committed to making our food system more sustainable; reducing its environmental impact while ensuring access to healthy and nutritious food for all.

Food

The global food system is responsible for approximately one-third of greenhouse gas emissions, making food sustainability a key area for action. Intensive food production contributes to biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion. At the same time, access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food is a growing public health concern. At the University of Sheffield, we recognise that food sits at the intersection of environmental sustainability and social wellbeing, and that a fairer, healthier, lower-carbon food system must be central to our institutional sustainability ambitions.

In support of this, in early 2025 the University signed up to the Menus of Change initiative – a framework developed by the Culinary Institute of America and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health to align food choices with public health and environmental responsibility. The initiative provides evidence-based principles to support a shift toward plant-forward diets, minimise food waste, and promote transparency and resilience across food systems. This guidance will help shape our procurement, catering, and wider food-related decisions across campus in the future.

We've already implemented a range of initiatives to improve the sustainability of our food and catering operations. While we continue to promote dairy-free alternatives, we have also ensured our dairy milk is as environmentally and socially sustainable as possible. All milk served in University cafés and catering is sourced from a Sheffield-based farm, located only four miles from campus. This initiative alone has cut the carbon footprint of milk deliveries by 65% and eliminated the need for more than 87,000 plastic bottles annually through the use of reusable stainless-steel churns.

Targets and commitments

2025

Expand partnership with local ethical food suppliers and promote their practices through communications and education.

2025

Use Menus of Change principles to underpin procurement and menu planning University-wide, embedding sustainability into all food services.

2025

Establish annual food-related emissions reporting using category-specific CO2e data, with the first baseline set from 2023/24 spend.

2026

Reduce emissions from campus food procurement, with an initial focus on reducing meat and dairy options across campus catering and events, and increasing plant-forward offerings in all menus and events by 2026.

2026

Mandate food carbon reporting for all UNICUS and high-volume procurement categories by 2026.

Footprint: Food

The University's local ethical coffee supplier has helped eliminate more than 11,000 single-use coffee bags, delivering products in reusable containers via electric vehicles and roasting beans just three miles from campus using solar-powered infrastructure.

Efforts to reduce single-use plastics continue to evolve, from physical infrastructure changes like the installation of more water fountains across campus, to the introduction of a levy on single-use cups in our cafes. While uptake of reusable food and drink containers has been modest, regular promotions significantly increase participation in reusable cups. Across the campus, however, the majority of takeaway drinks are still sold in single-use cups, highlighting the need for sustained engagement and systems change.

Despite these successes, food-related emissions remain significant. Our food Scope 3 carbon footprint dropped from an estimated 1,594 tonnes CO_2e in 2018/19 to 1,160 tonnes CO_2e in the most recent year – a reduction partly driven by post-pandemic shifts to hybrid working. Nevertheless, substantial emissions persist from the food we continue to buy. Procurement data shows that meat and poultry account for a disproportionate share of food-related emissions. Every £1 spent on meat results in approximately 2.11 kg of CO_2e, significantly higher than plant-based alternatives and as a result many internal catered lunches have already moved to providing exclusively vegetarian and vegan options.

Our food system is also a platform for education, innovation, and local impact. Partnerships such as those with our local suppliers demonstrate how values-based procurement can reduce emissions while supporting community businesses and providing real-world learning opportunities for students and researchers.

Going forward, we must base decisions on robust data, especially as food remains a highly personal and sometimes emotive issue. With clear baseline data now in place and behaviours beginning to shift, the University is well-positioned to drive deeper change across food procurement, consumption, and waste – balancing environmental impact, health outcomes, and local economic benefit in a just and joined-up approach.

Vision

We will reshape our campus food system around health, fairness and low carbon by accelerating a plant-forward shift, centring sustainability in procurement and being transparent about environmental impact. We will minimise single-use packaging and food waste through redesigned systems and reuse, use robust emissions data to guide choices and policies, and engage our community through education, incentives, partnerships and visible leadership in sustainable food practice.

2027

Include sustainability and carbon impact guidance in all University catering booking systems by 2027 to inform choices and track performance.

2027

Introduce a food carbon literacy campaign for students and staff by 2027 to support informed dietary choices and behaviour change.

2027

Make vegetarian and vegan catering the default catering choice for all centrally funded events by 2027.

2027

Implement a new policy requiring food event organisers to justify inclusion of high-emission items (e.g. beef, cheese) by 2027.

2027

Reintroduce and improve incentives for reusable container schemes, with the goal of 50% reusable cup use across cafes by 2027.

2028

Target a 50% reduction in single-use plastic from catering by 2028 through standardised reusable systems and revised supplier contracts.

Footprint: Travel to campus

Transport is one of the most significant contributors to carbon emissions in the UK and globally, accounting for approximately one-third of emissions.

Travel to campus

In South Yorkshire, car use dominates, with 50% of journeys made in single-occupancy vehicles, and transport-related emissions per capita nearly twice those seen in London. While travel choices are often borne out of personal circumstances and lack of suitable alternatives, commuting nevertheless contributes significantly to the University's Scope 3 emissions. The University of Sheffield recognises its responsibility to encourage and facilitate more sustainable travel to and from campus, to reduce carbon emissions and air pollution, and to create a healthier, more accessible environment for staff and students and the wider city.

Over the last decade, commuting emissions at the University have declined – from around 3,400 tonnes of Scope 3 CO_2e in 2013/14 to approximately 2,500 tonnes in 2023/24. This progress has been driven by a combination of demand management, behaviour change initiatives and increased investment in and engagement with sustainable transport options. Initiatives such as the BetterPoints app, which rewards staff and students for choosing sustainable modes of travel have grown steadily, with monthly active users rising from around 500 in 2020 to over 2,000 by late 2024.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. In 2023, 25% of staff still commuted alone by car, a proportion that has risen somewhat since a low of 21% in 2014. Walking to campus is increasingly popular, with staff walking rates rising from 17% in 2004 to 24% in 2023, while cycling has seen notable growth, more than doubling from 7% to 17% over the same period.

Targets and commitments

2025

Work with local transport providers to increase service frequency and improve routes based on staff home location data, prioritising the five most underserved corridors. Use proceeds from parking operations to generate a 10% annual surplus, reinvested in sustainable travel infrastructure and offsetting schemes.

2025

Publish annual commuting emissions reports, including per capita emissions and mode share breakdowns by staff group and department.

FROM 2025

Shift internal communications to reset expectations: reinforce that car parking is not guaranteed and highlight benefits of sustainable travel.

FROM 2025

Use behavioural frameworks (e.g. COM-B, EAST) to underpin travel policy messaging and track uptake of incentives.

Footprint: Travel to campus

Public transport use, however, has remained relatively stable, hovering between 26% and 29% since 2014.

Student commuting patterns follow similar trends. In 2023, 61% of students walked to campus, while 27% used public transport and just 4% travelled alone by car. Student commuting emissions have also dropped, from 3,319 tonnes in 2004 to an estimated 1,952 tonnes in 2019.

Behavioural incentives and infrastructure improvements have played an important role in shifting travel habits, but further progress is needed. Car use remains the main contributor to our commuting emissions, making up approximately 75% of CO2e., with additional detrimental impacts on air quality and congestion. Transport choices are shaped by factors such as accessibility, affordability, infrastructure, and confidence. We need to take a more coordinated approach, both within the University and working with external partners – combining data, policy, infrastructure, and engagement – to support a sustained shift toward low-carbon commuting.

We want to create a culture where staff who can travel sustainably are expected to do so, and where car parking is not routinely provided by the University. This is especially important for new starters, who should be made aware of the University's sustainability ambitions from the outset. Encouraging more sustainable travel will reduce emissions and support the health and wellbeing of our University community, while also helping to create a cleaner, more liveable and less car-centric city for everyone.

Vision

We will enable low-carbon, accessible commuting so that active and public transport become the default for staff and students. Through targeted infrastructure, behavioural incentives, strong partnerships and systematic data collection, we will reduce emissions and support health and wellbeing, aiming to be among the lowest per-capita university emitters for travel while contributing to a more liveable, less car-centric city.

FROM 2025

Deliver annual campaigns linking commuting choices to health, cost and environmental impact, tailored to staff and student audiences.

2026

Increase BetterPoints app participation in line with current growth, aiming for 2,500 monthly active users by mid-2026 and ongoing engagement incentives.

2025–2030

Deliver an updated Commuter Travel Plan for 2025–2030 to embed emissions targets and guide implementation.

2028

Expand and improve active travel infrastructure by 2028, including secure bike storage, showers, lockers and maintenance facilities linked to building occupancy.

2030

Transition 100% of the University-owned fleet to electric vehicles by 2030, excluding plant machinery without feasible electric alternatives.

2030

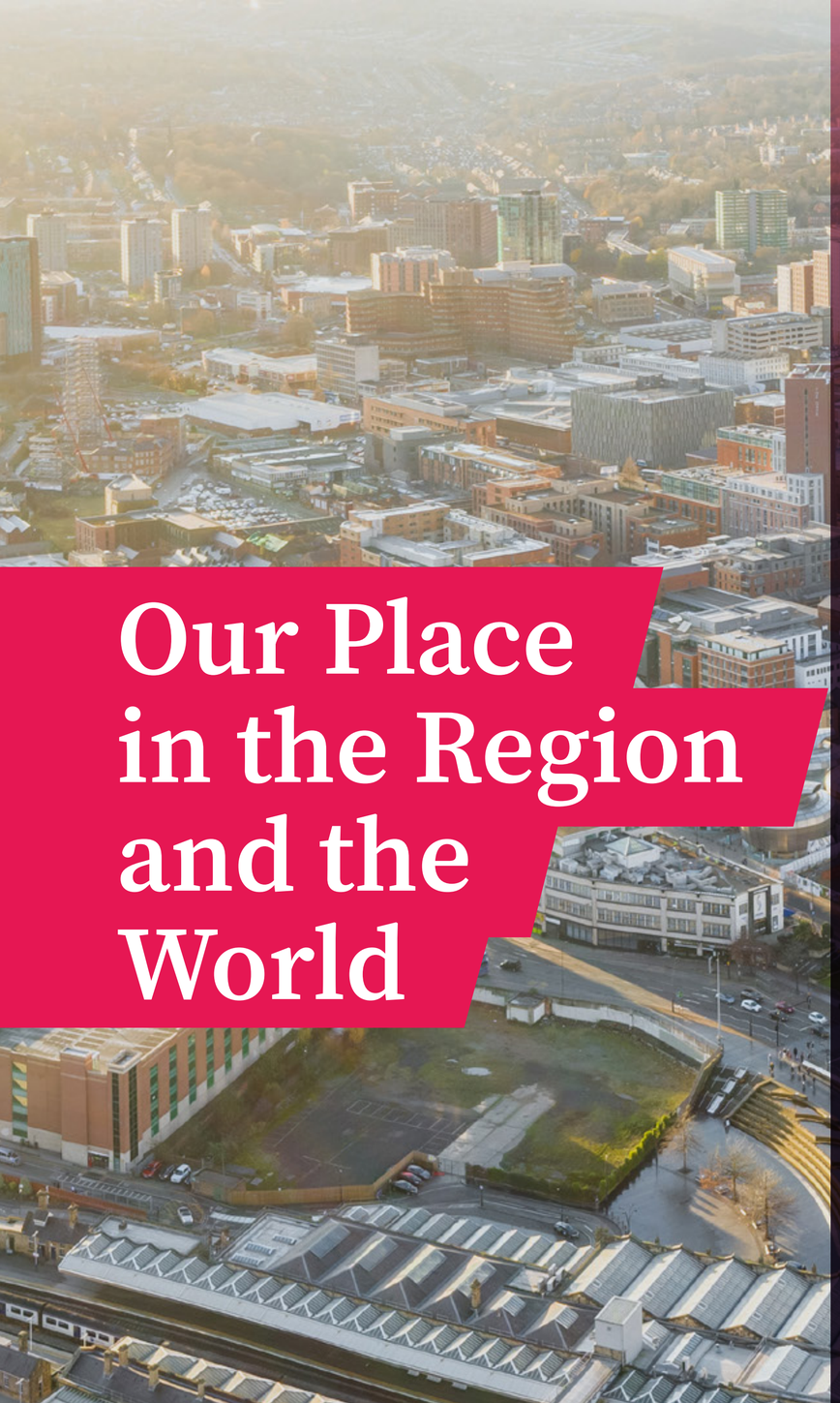
Establish real-time travel emissions monitoring for business and commuting travel by 2030, using in-house digital tools where feasible.

2030

Achieve a 70% reduction in commuting emissions by 2030 compared to 2018/19 levels.

2030

Reduce the proportion of staff commuting alone by car to 20% or less by 2030, from a baseline of 25% in 2023.



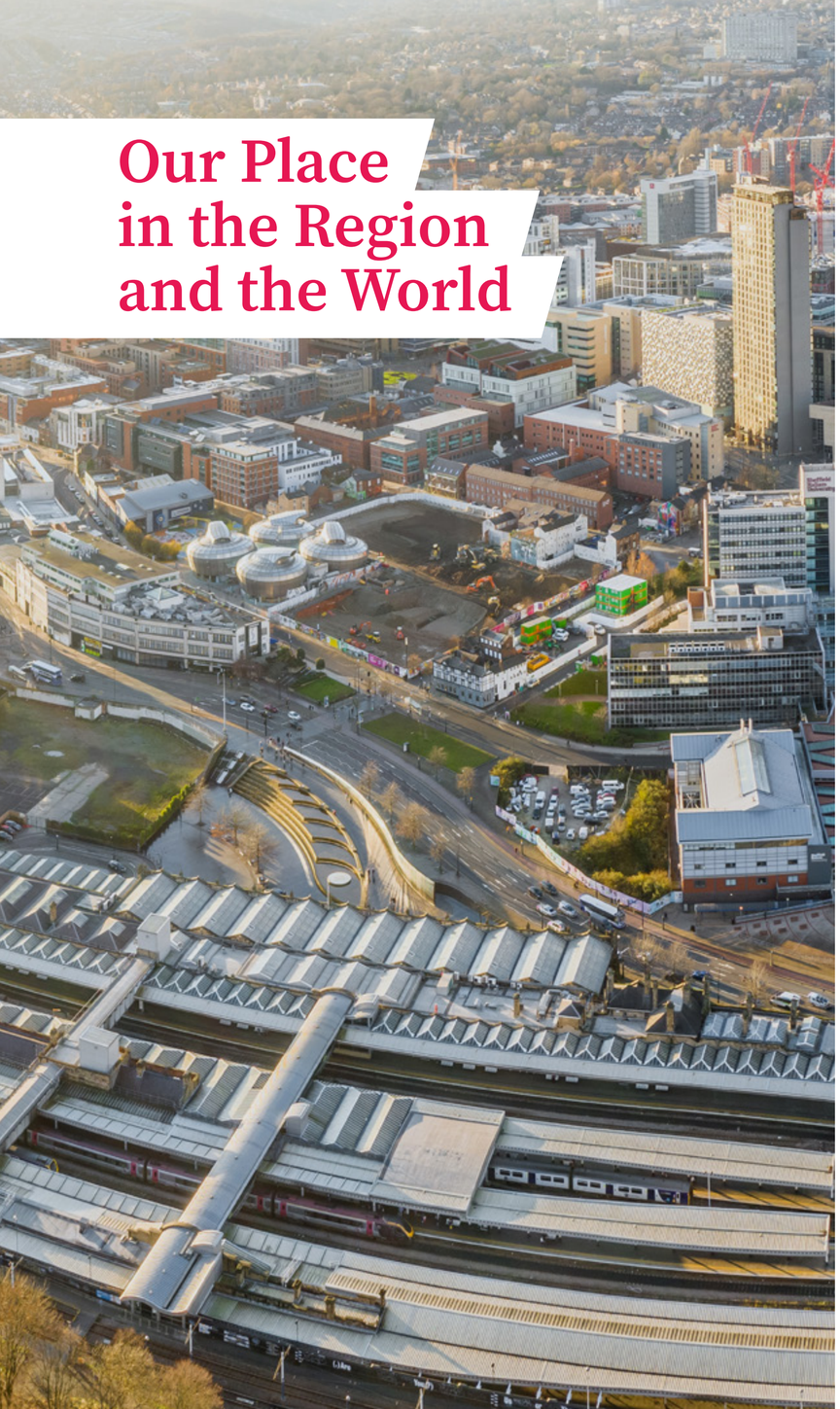
Our Place in the Region and the World

The University of Sheffield is a university rooted in its city, region and community, yet outward-looking in its ambitions and impact.

Founded through the donations of local people to advance knowledge and opportunity, we remain committed to creating social and economic value in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, the UK and across the world.

Our role in society extends beyond education and research: we are a major employer, a driver of economic development, and a place where ideas, innovation and collaboration thrive. We recognise that true sustainability is not only environmental but also social and economic – requiring investment in people and communities, fairness in opportunity, and an active contribution to building a better future for all. As we work towards our net zero goals, we will also ensure that our civic mission, international engagement, policy influence and investments support the creation of a sustainable, inclusive world.

Through our research, our partnerships, our students and our staff, we have an extraordinary opportunity to make a difference – locally, nationally and globally.



Our Place in the Region and the World

The University of Sheffield is a global institution, with thousands of international students and researchers, and partnerships that span continents.

Business and international travel

The exchange of people, ideas and knowledge across borders is vital to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and to tackling global challenges such as climate change, poverty and inequality.

International travel contributes significantly to our carbon footprint. International students travelling to and from our campus in the UK are responsible for at least 9,000 tonnes CO2e annually, with business travel of a similar magnitude. However, the cultural, social and economic benefits brought by international students, researchers and collaborations are profound and enduring. There has been significant progress in reducing business travel emissions, from around 35,000 tonnes in 2018/19 to under 10,000 tonnes in 2024/25. While the Covid-19 pandemic enforced a large and sudden drop in emissions, international travel remains substantially below pre-pandemic levels and we are committed to continuing this trend.

We are also at the forefront of research to decarbonise the aviation sector. Our work on sustainable aviation fuel (SAF), lightweight aircraft structures and aerospace innovation positions Sheffield as a global leader in efforts to make air travel more sustainable. These advances offer long-term hope for reducing aviation emissions on a global scale.

However, these technological solutions are still emerging and will take time to scale, and to significantly reduce carbon emissions of long-distance travel, we must decrease flying. In the meantime, we must act responsibly. We will continue to work to reduce unnecessary travel and encourage lower-carbon alternatives wherever possible, while supporting the international mobility that underpins our global impact.

We will accurately account for the emissions associated with international travel and factor these into our sustainability planning. Improving the quality of the data we collect on international travel is a critical next step. A better understanding of the scale and pattern of this activity will allow us to plan more effectively and identify opportunities to reduce emissions without undermining our global reach. This data collection has been identified as a Scope 3 checkpoint for 2030, ensuring we continue to monitor and respond to emissions in this important area.

Our Place in the Region and the World

Vision

We will sustain a global university community while sharply reducing the carbon impact of how we connect. We will reserve flying for activity with clear academic or societal value, favour lower-carbon alternatives and digital collaboration, and use better data to guide continual reduction. As aviation decarbonises through research we help lead, we will align international mobility with our climate goals so our global reach comes with a smaller footprint.

Targets and commitments

2030

An annual budget of less than 8,000 tonnes CO_2e for business travel, reviewed in 2030

Our Place in the Region and the World

The University of Sheffield is one of the UK's original civic universities, founded through donations from the people of Sheffield.

Civic university and community relations

Our mission remains rooted in public good, with sustainability central to our role as an anchor institution in South Yorkshire.

We contribute to the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of our region through collaboration with partners such as Sheffield City Council, Sheffield Hallam University and the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. Together, we are working to tackle shared challenges including climate resilience, energy transition, biodiversity loss, sustainable transport, and inclusive economic development.

Through initiatives like the South Yorkshire Sustainability Centre, we connect world-leading research with the real-world needs of communities, businesses and public services. Our staff and students are central to this work, delivering outreach projects, public engagement activities and community partnerships that promote environmental awareness and sustainable living.

We are also a major economic and social contributor to our region. In 2022–23, University activities generated £4.82 billion in economic impact, supported nearly 13,000 jobs in South Yorkshire, and produced a return of £6.40 for every £1 spent. More than 2,200 student volunteers gave over 36,000 hours of their time to support local charities and community groups, and 750 healthcare students contributed over 365,000 hours to NHS clinical placements.

As a major employer, landowner and civic partner, we take our responsibilities to our local communities seriously. We engage proactively through local forums, partnerships and voluntary sector collaboration, listening to local concerns and working together to address them.

We encourage our students to play a positive role in their neighbourhoods, promoting sustainable behaviours and civic responsibility. Initiatives such as "Donate, Don't Waste" help reduce waste and support local charities—avoiding over 15 tonnes of CO_2e and enabling the donation of over £1.2 million worth of items since the scheme began.

Through public lectures, events, and shared spaces, we aim to foster a culture of informed citizenship, strengthen local partnerships, and contribute to a fairer, greener city.

Our Place in the Region and the World

Vision

We will be a trusted civic partner for Sheffield and South Yorkshire, co-creating practical sustainability solutions that improve daily life and support a just transition. We will listen and respond to residents, reduce the local impacts of our activities, and help build respectful, thriving neighbourhoods.
We will turn university resources into community benefit through volunteering, knowledge exchange and programmes that prioritise reuse and redistribution.
By aligning our research, education and operations with local priorities, we will share value more widely and help our region become fairer, greener and more resilient.

Targets and commitments

2028

Continue to develop meaningful routes to engage with our region, co-developing sustainability solutions with local stakeholders.

2028

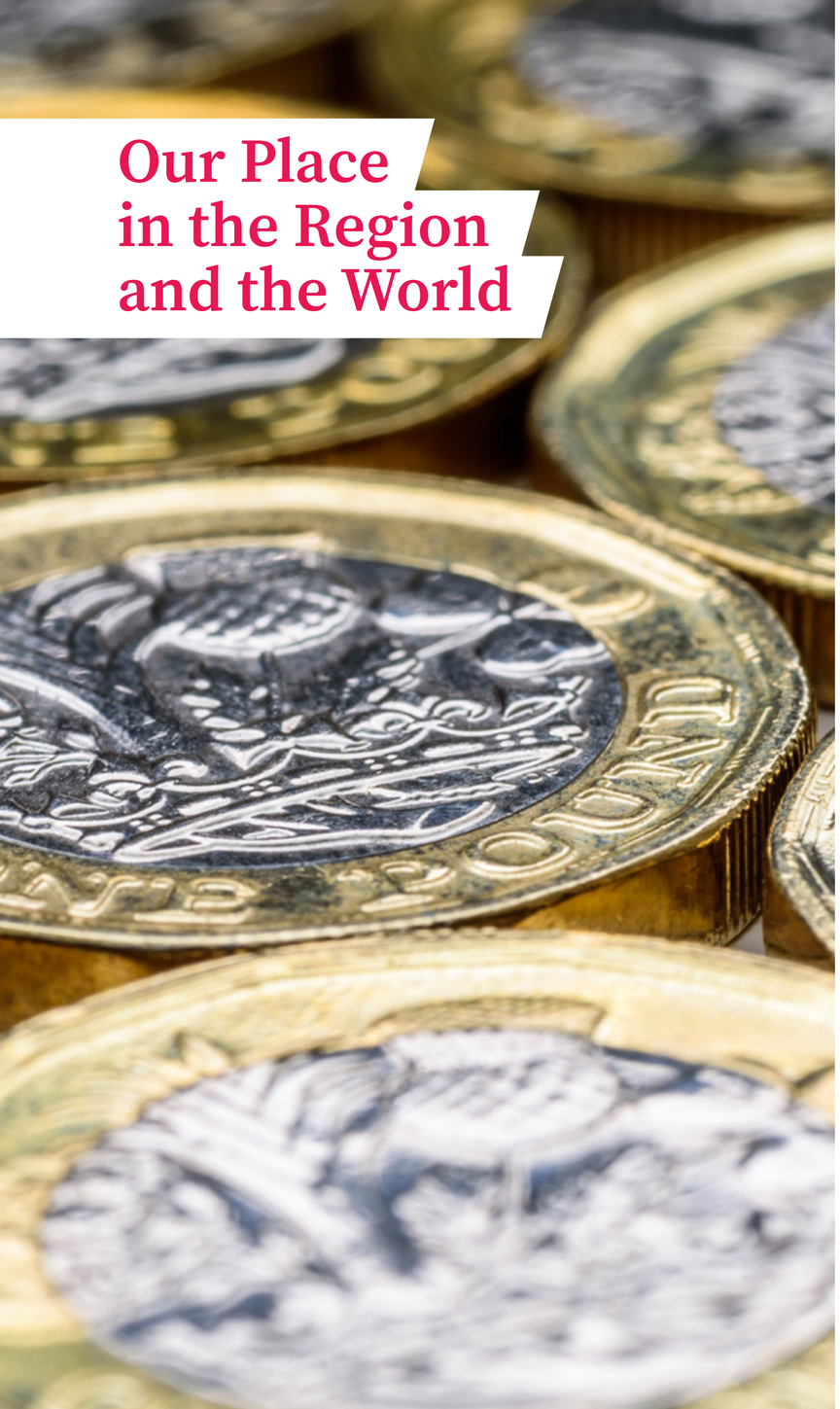
Improve donation rates through the Donate, Don't Waste scheme year-on-year from a baseline of 13,236 bags in 2024.

2030

Reduce complaints from local residents relating to student-related community issues.

2030

Find new ways to share unneeded University resource and equipment to reduce waste and help local communities.



Our Place in the Region and the World

The University of Sheffield is committed to ensuring that its financial decisions align with its broader sustainability values.

Investments

The way we invest our funds has significant ethical, environmental and social implications. As a large institution with a global footprint, our investment policy can act as a lever for positive change and a signal of our values to the wider community.

Our aim is to ensure that all University investments are managed in a way that reflects our commitment to environmental sustainability, social responsibility and good governance. We will actively divest from sectors that cause harm and invest in those that support a more sustainable and equitable future. We have held no shares in fossil fuel companies since 2018.

We will maintain a socially responsible investment policy that ensures our investment managers eliminate exposure to the following areas:

- Explicit environmental damage including, but not limited to, all fossil fuels companies
- Manufacture or sale of armaments.
- Manufacture of tobacco products.
- Sale of tobacco products where more than 10% of revenue is derived from these sales.
- Manufacture of non-pharmaceutical products tested on animals for cosmetic or other non-medical purposes.

We require our appointed Investment Managers to use both negative and positive screening tools and to engage directly with companies to encourage improved environmental, social and governance practices.

We will proactively reinvest capital into opportunities with measurable positive social and environmental impact. This includes, but is not limited to, investments in:

- Charities and social enterprises.
- Education and student housing.
- Housing associations.
- Renewable energy infrastructure.
- Green bonds and climate solutions.

As of the end of the 2024/25 academic year, 4.2% (£2.5 million) of the University's endowment was allocated to investments with a positive social or environmental impact. We will continue to publish an annual disclosure of all investment holdings and an annual compliance statement to demonstrate how the policy is being met. We will also continue to produce an annual Impact Report summarising the social and environmental outcomes of our positive impact investments.

Our Place in the Region and the World

Vision

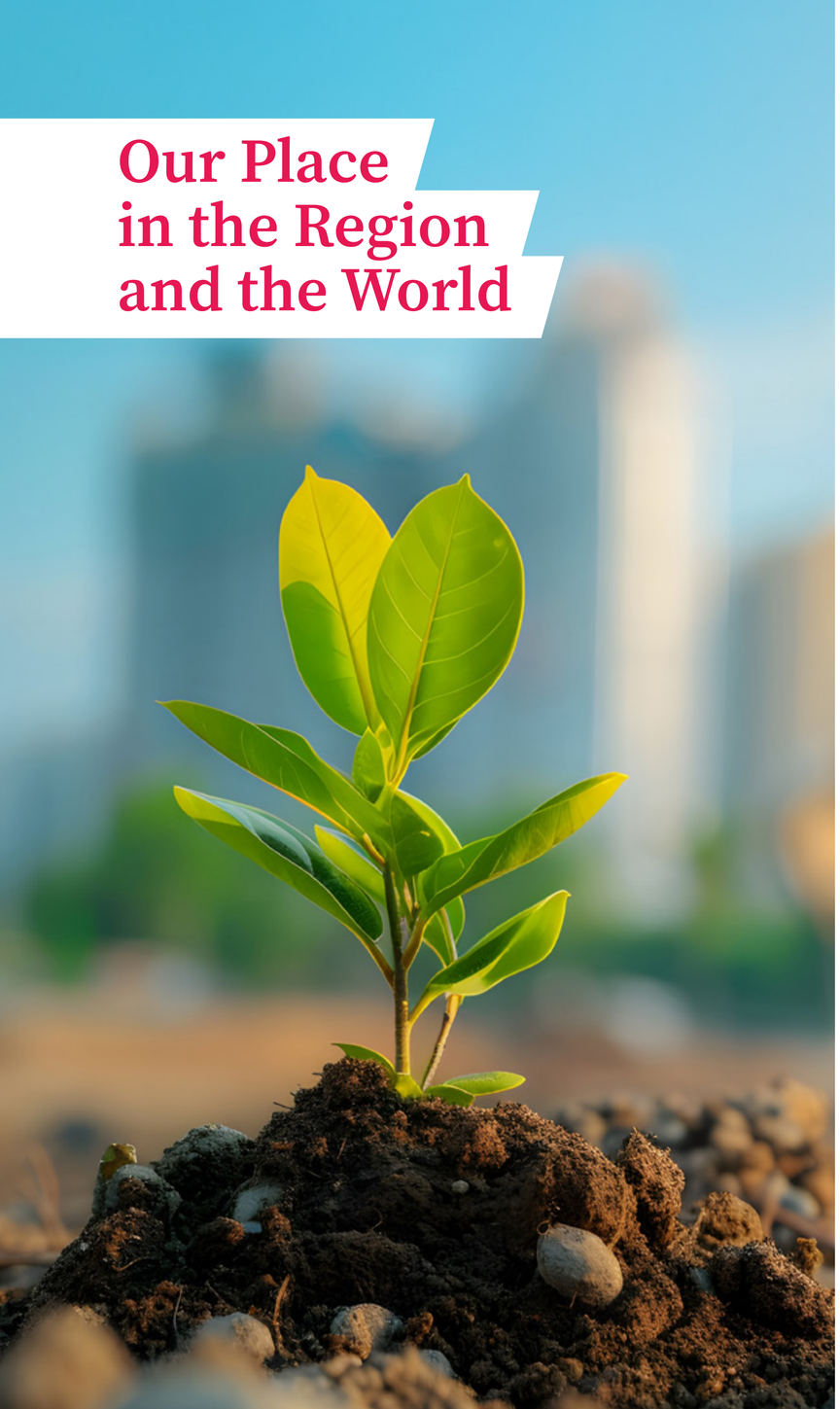
We will use our capital to accelerate a fair, science-aligned transition. We will back organisations that cut emissions and improve social outcomes, and we will challenge those that fall short. We will increase transparency by measuring and reporting the climate impacts of our portfolio and explaining how investment choices support our academic mission.

Targets and commitments

2030

Emissions associated with investments will be measured and reported by 2030.

Our Place in the Region and the World



We are committed to using our research expertise and institutional voice to support the development of more sustainable policy at local, regional, national and international levels.

Policy contributions

Through engagement with city, regional and national bodies, our academics and professional staff contribute to shaping policies on energy, environment, transport, housing, public health and more. Initiatives such as the South Yorkshire Sustainability Centre strengthen these links, providing evidence, insights and partnerships that enable better decision-making for a sustainable future.

We will continue to advocate for ambitious climate action, biodiversity recovery, fair transitions to net zero, and investment in sustainable development, ensuring that our university plays a leading role in building a more sustainable society.

Vision

We will make evidence-led policy engagement a core route to impact. Drawing on Sheffield's research strengths and our role as an anchor institution, we will work with partners across the city, region and beyond to shape practical policies for a low-carbon, nature-positive and fair economy, sharing data and lessons from our own operations to turn good policy into delivery.

Governance and Engagement

Sustainability at the University of Sheffield is a shared endeavour.

It draws on the strengths of our academic research, the expertise and commitment of our professional services staff, and the passion and leadership of our students. Our approach is shaped by the belief that real progress comes from collaboration – and our governance structures reflect this. We have created mechanisms that embed sustainability across all aspects of university life, grounded in evidence, guided by experts, and responsive to the voices of our community.

Governance and Engagement

Governance

UEB Sustainability Sub-Group

The Sustainability Sub-Group is the University's highest-level dedicated sustainability body. Reporting directly to the University Executive Board (UEB), it is chaired by a member of UEB and brings together senior decision makers with responsibility for sustainability and student representatives. This group is responsible for overseeing the delivery of the Sustainability Strategy, including making recommendations for budget allocation for major sustainability projects. It receives and reviews quarterly reports on carbon emissions, strategic progress, and other key performance indicators.

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Sustainability Network

The Sustainability Network is our community of practice – a cross-institutional group of staff and students drawn from faculties, schools, departments, and professional services. Its role is to champion, coordinate and support sustainability action across the University. Network members share insights, align activity, and learn from one another, helping to ensure our sustainability goals are embedded across research, teaching, operations, and engagement.

The Network provides a space for meaningful collaboration and knowledge exchange, and it plays a key role in ensuring that sustainability thinking informs decision-making at all levels of the institution.

Faculty, School and Departmental leadership

To embed sustainability across all areas of University life, we will ensure that every academic school and professional services department has a Sustainability Lead. As members of the Sustainability Network, these individuals will be responsible for advancing local actions, supporting staff and student engagement, and feeding into University-wide sustainability planning.

We will ensure sustainability is formally integrated into the University's annual planning round and five-year strategic planning process. This will include requiring schools, departments and faculties to set clear sustainability objectives and targets aligned with the institutional strategy, and to report on progress annually.

Through these actions, we will embed accountability and support a culture of continuous improvement, ensuring that our institutional sustainability goals are driven by both central leadership and local ownership.

Engagement

Staff action

To support and empower our sustainability leads, and to help staff and students play an active part in delivering our ambitions, the University will provide clear opportunities for people to contribute meaningfully to our sustainability plans. Building on the legacy of Green Impact and the success of LEAF (Laboratory Efficiency Assessment Framework), this will offer tailored support for those who want to make a difference in their own area of the University.

We recognise the passion and enthusiasm that exists across our community for sustainability, and we want to harness this energy where it can have the greatest impact. This will include practical guidance and toolkits, ways to recognise and celebrate progress, and opportunities to collaborate on shared goals. It will be closely aligned with our strategy themes, supporting individual behaviour change, staff and student engagement, and the wider institutional shifts needed to deliver against our priorities.

Student voice

We will amplify the student voice as a driver of innovation and accountability across the University, with clear routes to influence decisions and to see the results. Student representatives will continue to play key roles in our sustainability governance, including the Sustainability Sub-Group and the Sustainability Network, and will contribute through other University committees such as University Council, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee and the Finance Committee. We will also involve students in project groups for major developments so that lived experience and disciplinary insight shape design and delivery.

We will maintain constructive dialogue with student campaigns, building on changes won through collaboration, including fossil fuel divestment in April 2019 and switching to fully renewable electricity in May 2020, and we will continue to support staff and student ideas with small pots of funding for sustainability projects that meet our criteria.

Governance and Engagement

Reporting

At the University of Sheffield, we are committed to transparency, rigour, and continuous improvement in how we measure, report and act on our environmental impact. This is essential for ensuring accountability to our community and the wider public, and for guiding effective decisions as we move towards our net zero targets.

Standardised Carbon Emissions Reporting Framework

We are adopting the Standardised Carbon Emissions Reporting Framework (SCERF) – the most comprehensive and consistent reporting framework currently available for the higher education sector. SCERF is aligned with the Greenhouse Gas Protocol and was developed by the EAUC in collaboration with sector bodies including UUK and BUFDG. While not yet mandatory (as of 2025), this framework is expected to become the sector norm, and we are committed to early adoption in the spirit of leadership and transparency.

SCERF expands significantly on previous reporting approaches, requiring detailed data across all Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions. This includes everything from electricity and heating use, to business travel, supply chain purchases, student commuting, digital infrastructure, and cloud services. Collecting and managing this data is a complex task that will require collaboration from teams across the University, but it is essential for understanding and reducing our footprint.

The Sustainability Sub-Group is responsible for developing systems and processes to enable full SCERF-aligned reporting. The group will also be responsible for reviewing annual emissions data, providing governance, and advising on strategic priorities in response to our footprint.

We will continue to publish our carbon footprint and performance annually and use this data to track progress towards our targets and identify opportunities for action. By embracing detailed, standardised reporting ahead of regulatory requirements, we are reaffirming our role as a sustainability leader in the sector – and ensuring we are equipped with the insight needed to deliver meaningful change.

Ongoing review and improvement

Sustainability is a continuous journey, not a fixed destination. As such, we will regularly review and update this strategy as needed, responding to new evidence, changing circumstances, and feedback from our community. We are committed to challenging our assumptions, learning from experience, and adapting our approach to ensure it remains effective and relevant. We will also report annually on our progress to maintain transparency and accountability.