

Environmental Sustainability: Q&A Series

M&R and University of Worcester - in conversation with Director of Sustainability, Katy Boom and Assistant Director – Estates, Mark Evans



The University of Worcester has excellent sustainability credentials: ranked in the top 3 in the UK for Quality Education in all three years – 2019, 2020 and 2021 – of the Times Higher Education’s University Impact Rankings, winner of Sustainability Institution of the Year at the 2019 Green Gown Awards and awarded “First Class Honours” in the People and Planet University League for more than 10 years.



As one of the most sustainable universities in the UK, we were keen to catch up with them as part of our client Q&A Environmental Sustainability series to discuss the challenges they were facing and the solutions and strategies they’ve implemented.

We were interested to learn about the significance sustainability considerations play in the University’s daily life. The University declared a climate emergency and launched its Sustainability Strategy in 2020. It has signed up to the SDG Accord (committing to delivering the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals) and reports annually on its progress.

It is targeting net zero emissions by 2030 and implementing several strategies in order to achieve this. These include setting stringent sustainability criteria on all developments (e.g. targeting EPC-A, SKA Gold) and looking to decarbonise its heat network. Reducing Scope 3 emissions will be the greatest challenge for the University. To address this, the University has a comprehensive programme of education and engagement for their staff and students, to encourage them to learn more about sustainability and to participate in projects. It acknowledges the need for behavioural change in order to meet its targets and everyone on campus can get involved. It is also working with its supply chain, using NETPositive, to identify where steps can be taken to decarbonise. Finally, the University would consider participating in an appropriate sector-specific offsetting scheme on the right terms.

The University of Worcester is clearly well on the route to net zero and has a comprehensive sustainability strategy guiding their approach. Staff and student engagement is high, up to the Vice Chancellor, which no doubt will play an important role in helping it achieve its ambitious targets.

Read on to learn more about the University’s targets, achievements and future plans.

What carbon reduction targets have you set and how did you set them?

We started looking at our strategy for 2030 over two and a half years ago, initially looking at baseline data from 2005/2006. We have since rebased to 2018/2019 data. Like most institutions, the vast majority of our emissions are from Scope 3 – from staff and students commuting and from procurement.

Our target is net zero emissions by 2030. We are confident we can achieve a 50% reduction in emissions by 2030, with 50% offset of Scope 3 emissions.

We are hoping to install a community heat network, which would decarbonise our heat.

What strategies have you put in place to achieve your targets?

We have an overarching sustainability policy, which is broken down into 12 different areas, each with its own policy or strategy.

In 2019, we declared a climate emergency and adopted the new strategy in 2020. We publish an annual report which is independently audited and has won awards.

What external benchmarks do you use?

We have signed up to the Sustainable Development Accord and we report against the UN SDGs. We have ISO14001 and ISO 50001

Do you participate in external networks?

We're part of Sustainability West Midlands, which combines the NHS, local authorities and higher and further education. We also participate with EAUC. We are very keen on cross-sector collaboration.

We are also keen to share ideas with other universities and look at what has worked well for them. There is a lot of sharing between estates and sustainability teams at universities.

What do you see will be the biggest challenges to getting to net zero by 2035?

This will be trying to influence behavioural change in relation to transport and travel. We've been looking at this for a number of years and promoting things like bike share and car share, but it's a very hard nut to crack. Lots of staff who drive to work live close enough to walk, but they have other considerations, such as child pick-ups etc. so it's about giving them options. We're piloting blended working here so it will be interesting to see the impact this has and our annual staff and student travel surveys allow us to closely monitor impacts. We're also installing 100 EV charge points on campus and launching a salary sacrifice scheme for staff purchasing electric vehicles.

Student travel also makes up a large proportion of our emissions – much of this is our students who have to travel to placements, such as in nursing and teaching. We are looking at the possibility of a car pool scheme, so cars could be available to placement students during the day and then privately in the evenings.

We have a big impact on the city – we make up 10% of the city of Worcester. One student house with perhaps 5 cars will have a big impact on our neighbours. So we want to give our students options – make use of a shared car on campus and you won't need to bring your own car with you. We've also done a great deal with the local bus company for annual bus passes.

What are your strategies to getting there?

District heating will be a biggie – if we can decarbonise our heating and get base support for doing it, it will really help us on the way to our targets.

We are rolling out carbon literacy training for all our staff and students and for the Boards locally. We're also working with the County library service to do a bite size version for the community.

You mentioned that a large proportion of your scope 3 emissions come from procurement. What changes have you made to your supply chain to reduce those?

We use a tool called NETpositive, within which we can help our suppliers work with their supply chains to decarbonise. We also have sustainability as a standard agenda item within the contract review. We have a sustainability strategy group, with a procurement sub-group comprising procurement professionals, academics and students.

Our suppliers are definitely sitting up and taking notice – we've got around 430 suppliers using net positives, with over 9000 actions, of which 6000 are completed or currently being worked on.

What steps are you taking in relation to offsetting emissions?

We aren't currently involved with any schemes, but we are very keen to work with a sector specific one. The NUS and other partners are currently putting together what a good sector offset scheme would look like. We've set up a steering group to look into this further. We need a solution that is really credible, so we won't get involved in any offsetting until we're certain.

Looking at your estate, what challenges have you faced in improving the sustainability of your built environment?

Historic buildings and conservation

We have listed buildings on our City Campus dating back to 1779. The campus sits within a conservation area. All of these aspects bring their own challenges. For example, we've worked closely with the local conservation officer on how we can improve the airtightness of our building, by improving the windows but still maintaining the look and feel of a historic building.

Challenge of finding time to do works

Another challenge we face is finding time to do works, as the university is so busy. It is really quite complicated to deliver a project that involves intrusive work in a live environment. We can't just take a building out of circulation for 6 weeks so we have to work around people and that's always a challenge.

What approach do you take when redeveloping on campus?

We will look at derelict buildings and bring them back into use where possible. We have recently been working on our Health, Wellbeing and Medical Building project, which is a refurbishment of former newspaper offices. The building has been stripped right back, to the point we've taken a third of the building away but have reconstructed it in a sympathetic way, will adhere to strict air tightness targets and will be reclad. We make the architects and M&E designers work hard, for example by setting a target of EPC "A" and RICS SKA Gold targets.

We also set really, really tough social value targets. It is really important to us, as such a large part of the Worcester community, to try to keep spend local where possible. On the Health, Wellbeing and Medical project, we're looking to deliver £1.6m of social value – this includes donations to foodbanks, keeping the spend local within 25 miles etc. Not only does that reduce the amount of travelling to site, it also means there is a multiplier effect that is being cast out into Worcester and Worcestershire. As an education institution, we also like to encourage training and bringing through the next generation of skilled workers, so we set aggressive apprenticeship targets and we're supporting our contractor's focus on getting more women into construction.



We have a framework of contractors and consultants and our procurement process is structured in a way that organisations with a similar ethos and desire to that social value commitment, to carbon reduction etc. come to work with us.

What technological solutions do you use to help with metering and monitoring?

We have half hour metering, which is all online so easily monitored. We link into our BMS systems and have just completed a big BMS upgrade. It's fundamental to effective performance of the building that the key users understand how it works, so we run Soft Landings so users can be brought into the building early on and learn how it works – the contractor doesn't just handover the keys and leave. We work with our contractors throughout the first 12 months of the building's life so they can guide us through how the building operates, through every season.

We also try to educate our staff in the use of the buildings, starting with the basics, such as if you've got the heating on, don't open the windows etc.

We have benefited from Salix funding. We're going to create a digital twin at the campus and map one of our buildings, so we can better analyse its use and efficiency. It's important that it's not just the energy officer's role to keep an eye on the building – it's making sure we inform and educate all colleagues, including timetabling and admin colleagues, so they all understand the same issues. When we are looking at timetabling and how we're using our buildings and integrating it all, we will do a small pilot to see how it works and how it integrates with existing systems before we go full steam ahead.

Do you have a biodiversity strategy for campus?

Yes, we do, and this is another sub-group of the sustainability strategy group. It comprises staff, academics and students with expertise in biodiversity and technicians as well. We also have student societies who contribute, such as the Nature Society.

What about your staff and students: how are you influencing behavioural change?

What have been the easy wins?

Being a higher education institution, the easy wins are teaching our students and working with our students. We are also very lucky with our Board and Vice Chancellor, who are very, very committed to the decarbonisation agenda. They will take the long view and look at overall benefits, rather than just initial outlay. Through their engagement, we have benefited from a long programme of investment on campus in decarbonisation.

Sustainability is fully embedded not just in Estates, but it is integral in our teaching and learning strategy and our research strategy as well.

Staff are on board. We don't take a top down or bottom up approach – it's both. We engage and support staff. They are very engaged and have always been keen to come up with their own ideas. They like to lead on projects so we have several staff-led projects and initiatives on campus. Students also participate in both voluntary and paid roles. At the start of the year, we hold an event akin to speed-dating, where we recruit green and impact project assistants and we match-make them with staff teams.

We have also run periodic campaigns with our security team – they work in different teams, with a friendly competition between them to see who can identify the most “slips” when they go round the campus. For example, windows left open, unreported dripping taps etc. The winning team gets a prize and the students then analyse and write up the data, which we can use going forward. This came out of the ideas of our security colleagues who wanted to help but without adding an onerous burden to their already busy day job.

Our Facilities and Estates teams will always look for things which make their life easier. For example, they'll look for a component which might save water, which will be easy to maintain and cheaper and after running a short trial for a few months, if it works, we'll adopt that component as standard. They drill into a level of detail to make sure they're looking at the most sustainable option. Sustainability is now so ingrained in the facilities and estates teams, we are

able to focus our scaffolding projects on other parts of the university. We pilot and trial everything as much as possible before going full steam ahead.

Do an institution's sustainability credentials influence who wants to study there?

The NUS have been carrying out longitudinal studies on this. The data year in year out is saying the same thing: over 80% of students want their universities to be sustainable; over 60% want to learn about sustainability. We're currently looking at bridging the gap between what students say they want and where the level of their knowledge currently is. We've got a captive and willing audience amongst the students – they want to take responsibility and do their bit. At enrolment, we encourage all our students to do an open book sustainability literacy test. We can then map the extent of knowledge and skills annually and see if we are actually making a difference. We have found that, when you map our students' knowledge to the UK population or the world population, they certainly need some more knowledge, so it's good that they're coming to our university and are a receptive audience to come and learn.

Tell us about some recent projects which demonstrate your commitment to sustainability

We created the Art House, by transforming a Grade II listed former car showroom into an art facility. We got a RICS SKA Gold rating on that – the second higher education institution to do so - and also won a Green Gown award, so are really proud of our work on this project.

We have recently completed a Salix funded project to upgrade the roofs, with increased levels of insulation, on two buildings and replaced over 200 single glazed windows with double glazed units across the Estate. The scheme was completed underbudget in a very ambitious 6 week period.



Get in touch



Joanna Davies

Partner

T: +44 (0) 1223 222429

E: joanna.davies@mills-reeve.com



Laura Ludlow

Principal Associate

T: +44 (0) 1223 222366

E: laura.ludlow@mills-reeve.com

For the property industry, the landscape is being redrawn. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, combined with longer-term societal changes which are gathering pace, are bringing about a transformation in how we live and work, and how we occupy and use space. Our buildings and communities are being redefined and repurposed. At Mills & Reeve, we are scanning the horizon and Mapping the FutuRE. Visit our city here: [Forward looking and insightful legal content from our leading legal experts \(mills-reeve.com\)](#)