

Sustainability report

June 2021 to May 2022

**Royal
Geographical
Society**

with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning

● Working towards a more sustainable Society

Introduction

The Society's strategy positions sustainability as a central objective both in our daily work as a team, and in the work of our communities. It recognises the need for both ambition and accountability in its approach to, and performance on, the range of sustainability and environmental change issues.

In June 2021, the Society's Council were presented with the first report on sustainability actions and challenges. This will now be an annual feature of the Society's reporting cycle, and a concise version of this report will be made publicly available on the website. Relevant elements of this information will also be presented in the Trustees' Annual Report that is sent to all Fellows and Members.

Below is the report for June 2022 and it includes an overview and review of sustainability-related activities across the Society in relation to the [Society's Strategic Plan](#).

This report signals our 'continuous improvement' or ratchet approach to sustainability concerns. It acknowledges our main impacts and current actions as an organisation.

However, it does not seek to summarise the very substantial contributions to sustainability-related engagement, research, policy, teaching and learning delivered by the Society, and by our Fellows, Members, working groups and others, although some illustrative examples are highlighted towards the conclusion of the report. Nor does it detail all of the specific actions (e.g. reducing the environmental impact of the Annual International Conference across recent years) that have been recorded elsewhere.

Sustainability activities and actions relating to the Society's aims

1. **Empower and support geographers, and those applying geographical expertise and approaches, in the development and sharing of geographical knowledge.**
 - **Advocate for geography to ensure that the value of its research findings and its importance to supporting positive change in society, the economy, the environment and in policy decision making are fully recognised.**

COP-26 Joint Climate Declaration: A Joint Declaration was issued by the IGU, National Geographic, RGS-IBG, RSGS, and the RCGS and signed by most of the world's geographical societies on climate and biodiversity emergencies, with particular reference to COP26. This grew out of an event co-convened by the Society. Building on

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this successful joint international meeting a further gathering was organised linked to the Biodiversity Conference of the Parties to be held in Kunming, China, planned for summer 2022 (the date has moved several times due to COVID). Furthermore, the Society is leading a collaboration on Global South climate learning resources and events (with the Open University and IGU).

The Society has significant positive impacts in advancing insight, engagement and action on sustainability issues. Fuller accounts of such work can be explored within each area of the Society's work and in the Annual Review, but the following are illustrative of work in the year since June 2021:

Sustainability themes are persistent and prominent themes within the academic journals, related digital outputs, workshops and Annual Conference of the Society. The Society publishes a top ranked journal, [WIREs Climate Change](#), with Wiley and The Royal Meteorological Society. The [Geography Directions](#) blog has featured many pieces on sustainability themes and on green futures. Virtual issues were published featuring papers from the journals for COP25. There are a range of active [research groups](#) working on sustainability-relevant themes. Of particular relevance to this report, are the [Climate Change](#) and [Energy Geography](#) Research Groups and the initiation of a Professional Practice Group on Disaster Risk Management.

Working with Heads of University Departments, five [Fieldwork Principles](#) have been adopted to underpin taught undergraduate fieldwork. These have also been fully integrated into the Society's Grants Giving programme. Principle 2 relates to Sustainability – and requires the environmental impact of fieldwork and its carbon footprint be considered and justified in the context of learning (research) outcomes. A resource bank has been developed to support implementation.

Environment and sustainability themes are a sustained and prominent feature of the Education team's work. In the period under consideration this has included the generation of '[climate change tiles](#)' that are designed to travel well on social media as well as together as an online resource.

The Society's Head of Education provided a chapter on *Supporting young peoples' awareness and development of green skills* for the DfE commissioned Rapid Evidence Review to support the DfE's development of its Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy. This contribution was discussed at a meeting with Robin Walker MP Minister of State for Schools DfE (26.4.22).

We provided a consultation response to the proposed GCSE in [Natural History](#).

- **Provide high quality (educational) resources**

The Society's Education department continued to explore sustainability within its range of educational resources for schools. This work included interviews with a number of speakers talking about climate, sustainability and related themes within the [podcast series](#), the sharing of climate change tiles through twitter and in this [gallery](#), and the inclusion of a unit on the Carbon Cycle in the new online [Subject Knowledge Programme](#) for trainee and early career teachers.

2. Amplify the contribution that geography makes to understanding the world and how it makes a difference to everyone's lives.

- **Develop the skills, infrastructure and partnerships needed to generate high quality geographical content that can be shared globally, including as mass media outputs.**

The Society was a close partner in a 40-part BBC Four radio show, [39 Ways to Save the Planet](#), which was broadcast through 2021 and was repeated in the first weeks of 2022. There were various expressions of collaboration, from advising regarding ‘on air’ geographer talent, through to further reading links for audiences, and schools-targeted education materials linked to specific episodes that relate to the curriculum. These educational resources were recognised with an award from the [Geographical Association](#).

- **Use the Society’s reputation and convening power to develop and maintain effective networks of influence.**

The Director joined a newly formed Net Zero Working Group rooted in the Exhibition Road Cultural Group: formed with neighbouring organisations. The Exhibition Road Cultural Group (ERCG) to which the Society belongs (along with the museums and other cultural bodies) initiated a group in early 2022 to share plans and ideas in relation to progressing towards ambitious sustainability objectives. While ‘Net Zero’ provides the headline objective and current title the group quickly agreed a wider sustainability frame around the work.

The Director represents the Society at the strategy meetings, and will chair a working group, and relevant members of staff (Facilities; event programming; communications) will engage as relevant with specific sub-initiatives. This work complements and extends our own annual sustainability reporting to Council. While cautious about how we invest scarce time at the outset the requirements are contained and productive. These include participation in meetings, info sharing, drawing profile to collective ambitions and expanding our joint events programming. The particular family of institutions brought together in the ERCG have the potential to do something significant and distinctive and there are particular contributions that the Society can make to this work.

3. Engage, serve and develop the Society’s membership.

Sustainability themes were prominent across the Public and member events at the RGS HQ and across the regions, including the Regional Theatre Programme, including Tom Heap presenting lectures based on the book of his ‘39 Ways to Save the Planet’ radio shows. Panel events and talks regularly addressed demanding policy themes, including high profile guests and chairs such as the BBC’s Martine Croxall.

We encourage Fellows and Members to opt for digital communications over receiving print publications through the post. This is an ongoing campaign, and we know that a significant proportion of the membership like and value receiving the printed version of the Bulletin. In the last three years, we have only printed/posted print copies of the Annual Review to those Fellows and Members who have not given us an email address. For the 2022 AGM mailing, that includes the Annual Review, this was down to just over 1,000 members.

Where possible, all Society membership publications (e.g., Bulletin, Annual Review) are printed on recyclable paper – we avoid paper coatings/foil/embossing etc.

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The print edition of *Geographical* magazine, which is published under contract by Syon Publishing, is mailed out in compostable packaging. Our publishers of academic journals Wiley equally have directed attention to packing, covers and paper.

In 2021 the Society introduced a bioplastic membership card. This is an improvement on the previous plastic card in terms of impact. We are aware that a portion of our membership favour such a durable card (and some collect them across years). However, we are researching a move to strong paper-based cards which will further reduce their environmental impact. These are now used by large institutions such as the National Trust. There is not currently a cost-effective option for such a card for a membership body of our size, but the team are tracking developments.

4. Sustain the reputational, financial and institutional future of the Society.

- **Sustain existing, and develop new, relationships with corporate and other sponsors and partners, valuing their financial support, while recognising the mutual benefits of collaborative activity towards shared goals.**

We have relationships with Corporate Benefactors whose businesses have significant environmental impacts, but in areas (e.g., mobility, tourism) that are almost universal social practices. As with the Society's Responsible Investment Policy, the Society aims to be an engaged partner that seeks to advance sustainability objectives through our institutional relationships. The Director's Office and Development and Fundraising group regularly track the sustainability reporting and relevant news related to these prominent partnerships. In relation to all prospective future Corporate Benefactors, we carry out full due diligence on EDI and sustainability policies with potential partners.

- **Invest in the Society's building in South Kensington to lower running costs, reduce environmental impact, grow income, and provide an inclusive, welcoming and inspiring place for all.**

The age of parts of our building provides challenges in terms of sustainability but we are working hard within these constraints to be as sustainable as possible. The commissioned Feasibility Study by architecture practice Caruso St John, reported to the Council in December 2021, identifies routes to significant fossil fuel emissions reductions and improved thermal comfort. The next steps in that process will be laid out to Council in late 2022.

Energy

The single greatest environmental impact of the Society as an organisation is in its on-site energy usage. Since 2019 the Society has been supplied by renewable electricity and carbon-offset gas. We use BeOnd (beondgroup.com) as a broker to ensure that suppliers meet our Sustainability requirements.

Our gas supplier is Centrica SME (part of the British Gas group), who supply us with 'natural gas' and state (May 2022):

- British Gas currently uses 75% renewable energy sources - higher than the industry average at 40%

Our electricity supplier is EDF, who supply us with electricity that is 100% renewable. They state (May 2022):

- Modern carbon reporting standards like the GHG Protocol require organisations to base their carbon emissions reporting on the choice they make for their electricity purchases (called “market-based emissions”), as well as their grid connection (called “location-based emissions”). The idea is that using both numbers gives a fairer, more complete picture of an organisation’s efforts to reduce its carbon emissions by choosing to purchase low-carbon electricity or being more energy efficient.
- Renewable is backed by Renewal Energy Guarantees of Origin (REGOs) or GoOs (Guarantee of Origin).

We check our performance annually on [The Carbon Trust’s Energy Benchmark Tool](#) to ensure that we are performing within the industry standard.

Far more important however, than reducing the impact of our supply, is to reduce our own demand. The House Project to improve the Society’s building has this as a prominent element of the brief. We have three historical parts to the building, which presents a range of different challenges, but they are all very wasteful. Current and planned improvements to the heating and cooling plant and control systems will introduce some efficiency gains. The substantially more efficient new boilers installed in 2021, and the new chillers and Air Source Heat Pump and control systems that will be installed in spring/summer 2022, will all reduce fossil fuel demand, but these will be incremental gains.

It is also the case that introducing a system where all of the boilers function properly, rather than having up to 50% of the boilers out of use due to being unrepairable, may result in increases in total consumption for heating. The larger challenges are ahead of us and can only be addressed with a more thoroughgoing refit and rethinking of the HQ building to increase thermal comfort without recourse to mechanical heating and cooling. There is also positive potential in reducing the seasonal duration of heating and supporting behavioural responses (clothing etc) although there are legal and client expectation requirements that a building such as ours must meet.

Transport

We seek to support visitors to the building in travelling sustainably, and have worked with partners to promote sustainable travel to our site (e.g., the Exhibition Road Cultural Group and other transport specific groups). We have pressed for improved cycle parking provision in the streets surrounding our building and we are improving provision on site.

We have honed our hybrid events offer thus allowing digital attendance at more of our programme and meetings cycles. We are trialling a core-days working pattern and greater flexibility for our staff which will reduce commuter travel and/or the impacts of commuting.

Contractors and supplies

We keep track of the sustainability performance of our suppliers.

- Stationery suppliers: commercial.co.uk/sustainability/
- Security/cleaning and some minor works contractor: www.thepcsgroup.co.uk/Sustainability.aspx
- Catering: www.lodge-catering.co.uk/environment/ and through some of our larger events (e.g., the annual conference) opted for vegetarian/vegan options only.



Where we have control over our own provision (e.g. water, drinks) we are seeking to make changes that will deliver sustainability, quality and financial benefits (e.g. we have introduced filtered water in carafes (still and sparkling) in order to displace bottled water; we now purchase higher quality wine in large formats served in carafes to reduce waste and improve quality/price ratio for our own events).

We request that all suppliers have a Waste Management Plan in place to ensure the recycling of all building material.

Investment

The Society's Responsible Investment Policy tasks the Society's Investment Sub Committee with reviewing the investment managers' performance in relation to responsible investment, and it is a component of their presentations at each six-monthly presentation. Sustainability, in particular carbon intensity, considerations are prominent in these exchanges. Both of the Society's main investment managers (currently Newton and Ruffer) have policies and processes that meet the expectations of the Society as a responsible and engaged investor. Newton has been a prominent leader in the field, but Ruffer can also give a clear account of the presence of responsible investment considerations in their decision making.

In summer 2021 a body of interviews were held, and appointments made to the Society's Investment Sub-committee. The appointment process gave emphasis to ethical/ESG investment experience, and this has significantly strengthened sustainability-relevant experience on this committee.