

Sustainability report June 2022 – May 2023

Working towards a more
sustainable Society

**Royal
Geographical
Society**
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Introduction

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The Society states as its vision:

“For geography and geographers to be at the heart of developing a world that is more environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable.”

And as its mission that:

“The Society is dedicated to the advancement of geographical science and its application to the challenges facing the world’s people, places and environments.”

With one of the seven overarching principles being:

“The Society seeks to reduce the environmental impact of its activities and encourages others to do likewise.”

Our strategy positions sustainability as a central objective both in our daily work and in the work of our communities. We recognise the need for both ambition and accountability in our approach to, and performance on, the range of sustainability and environmental change issues.

Below is the report for June 2023. It includes an overview and review of sustainability-related activities across the Society in relation to our [Strategic Plan](#).

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

Executive summary

This report reviews our activities related to sustainability across the past year under each of the four strategic aims of the Society: empower, amplify, engage, and sustain. It includes case studies that highlight the Society's achievements in this area.

The Society is committed to:

- Conserving energy associated with our operations and events, giving preference to renewable sources of energy and related materials.
- Encouraging all staff to improve their awareness of the environment and to become more environmentally responsible.
- Using our position to communicate and promote the critical role geography has in establishing a sustainable society.
- Supporting visitors to the building in travelling sustainably and working with partners to promote sustainable travel to our site.
- Reducing waste through recycling, reusable items, working with ethical partners, and partnering with sustainable suppliers.

To achieve this, the Society aims to:

- Reduce our use of energy through improvements to energy efficiency and use of renewable energy sources where possible.
- Minimise waste by reducing consumption and developing effective waste management and recycling procedures.
- Ensure all staff have the opportunity to take an active role in implementing environmental best practice.
- Work with our suppliers to ensure they share our commitment and practices.
- Monitor and measure our energy consumption to optimise our energy efficiency and reduce travel unless it is avoidable.
- Use our position to communicate and promote the critical role geography has in establishing a sustainable society.



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During 2023/2024, the Society commits to:

- Reduce gas consumption through the installation of space sensors to monitor and adjust all heating.
- Reduce electricity consumption by changing to LED lighting in public areas on the ground floor.
- Rewild approximately three per cent of existing garden space with wildflowers.
- Introduce dry mixed recycling and food waste collections by a waste contractor using an electric fleet, powered by general waste energy creation.
- Improve cycle provision for staff and visitors, including additional bike parking for staff and tenants within the garden.
- Maximise our convening power and potential to meet large audiences to promote sustainability objectives and the role of geography and geographers. For example, through the *Earth Stories* programme.
- Provide a forum for lively debate and discussion on the theme of climate changed geographies, particularly through the Annual Conference and experimenting with new hub formats to engage geographers globally.

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.

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 2022.

Sustainability themes are persistent and prominent within our academic journals, related digital outputs, workshops and Annual Conference. The Society publishes a top-ranked journal, [WIREs Climate Change](#), with Wiley and the Royal Meteorological Society. Another of our journals, [Geo: Geography and Environment](#), has refined its remit to place environment, climate and sustainability at its core. The Chair's theme for the 2023 Annual Conference is [Climate changed geographies](#), selected by this year's Chair, Professor Harriet Bulkeley (Durham University, UK).

CASE STUDY

Grants giving programme

Each year the Society's grants programme supports upwards of 60 projects on topics across geography and related disciplines. One of the key foci of the research funded is sustainability, embedded in all grants awarded across career stages from undergraduate to senior researcher. In 2022 35 funded projects centred on sustainability topics – ranging from how food security can be achieved without biodiversity loss in Papua New Guinea, to the management of wind turbine decommissioning, reuse and refurbishment in Italy.

Applicants are required to show how they have considered the environmental impact of their work, and this element is assessed as part of the review process. This is underpinned by the Society's [Fieldwork principle 2: Sustainable fieldwork](#).

- ▼ Postgraduate Research Award recipient and PhD researcher Sophie Manson and Little Fireface Project Research Assistant Hafidz Prananta Hakamashe giving out a form of natural pest control to coffee farmers in Cipaganti, West Java. Image credit: Little Fireface Project (@littlefireface), William Hall (@willhallwildlife) and Alice Johnston (@alice.goes.places)



The [Geography Directions](#) blog has featured many pieces on sustainability themes and green futures. There are a range of active [research groups](#) working on sustainability-relevant topics. 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, the five [Fieldwork Principles](#) adopted to underpin taught undergraduate fieldwork have been integrated into the [Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography](#) and the Society's accreditation of undergraduate courses. 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, with blogs on the topic.

Environment and sustainability themes are a sustained and prominent feature of the Education team's

work. [Educational resources](#) for schools include a new section on climate change developed with FCDO support for a [Discovering Antarctica](#) unit on carbon and water in the online [Subject Knowledge Programme](#), and a [poster competition](#) with the International Geography Olympiad which had students from 50 countries producing posters on the effects of plastic pollution in aquatic ecosystems and their impacts on the oceans.

The Society is also part of a partnership led by the Natural History Museum and Royal Horticultural Society to establish a new [National Education Nature Park](#) and climate action awards scheme. This Department-for-Education-funded programme will launch in October 2023 with Esri UK providing a biodiversity mapping platform to support the programme. The Society's Head of Education was invited by the Department for Education to write a chapter titled 'Supporting young peoples' awareness and development of green skills' for its Rapid Evidence Review for the Implementation of the National Nature Park and Climate Leaders Awards.



- ▼ The Climate Change Research Group and Energy Geography Research Group are two of the Society's research and working groups working on sustainability-relevant topics.



- ◀ The winning poster in the poster competition with the International Geography Olympiad on the theme of 'The effects of plastic pollution in aquatic ecosystems and their impacts on the oceans'.

CASE STUDY

Teaching resource, podcast and CPD workshop: Geographies of sustainable development: what does Bolivia teach us?

The Education team have created an innovative [teaching resource](#) and [podcast](#) on sustainable development that foregrounds the expertise of Indigenous leaders in Bolivia. These Indigenous leaders are on the frontline of conflicts over land, fossil fuel extraction and trajectories of sustainability, in a country that leads radical debates on development and the environment. It is thus a crucial geography for teaching students about sustainable development and the SDGs.

A CPD workshop discussed how we engage with agendas to decolonise geography and how this resource can be used within these agendas. The workshop included:

- An introduction to Bolivia, as a country crucial for understanding the contested politics of sustainable development.
- A guided discussion about decolonising geography.
- A targeted session on how to teach and talk about race, coloniality and diversity in the classroom.
- A session on how the resource can be embedded into classrooms and teaching.

This resource was funded by a [RGS-IBG Innovative Geography Teaching Grant](#) (2019-2020) and was produced by Dr Jessica Hope (University of St Andrews) and Grace Healy.

What teachers are saying about this resource:

“We use the SDGs as a way to frame our KS3 curriculum. I try to relate what we are learning back to the SDGs but we don't often look from the indigenous perspective so this will be great.”

“The concept of sustainability as a whole is something that underpins our entire curriculum and all schemes of learning. Sustainable management, sustainable development, human rights issues etc. Really interesting to see South America represented – it's often ignored by 'traditional' geography perspectives.”



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

Sustainability themes were prominent across public and member-only events at the Society in London and across the regions. Panel events and talks regularly addressed demanding policy themes, including: [The Paris agenda - why COPs matter: global goals, international rulebook, national action](#), [Energy and development panel discussion](#), [Is travel worth the carbon emissions?](#), [Tropical forests and planet Earth: a macroscope view](#), [The hidden universe: biodiversity](#), [39 ways to save the planet](#), [From Kenya to the Arctic, our changing world](#), and [Climate change through the lens](#).

CASE STUDY

Using geography – geovisualisation

These [case studies](#), particularly those related to the [environment and natural resources](#), make the case for the importance and relevance of geography in understanding key issues in sustainability.

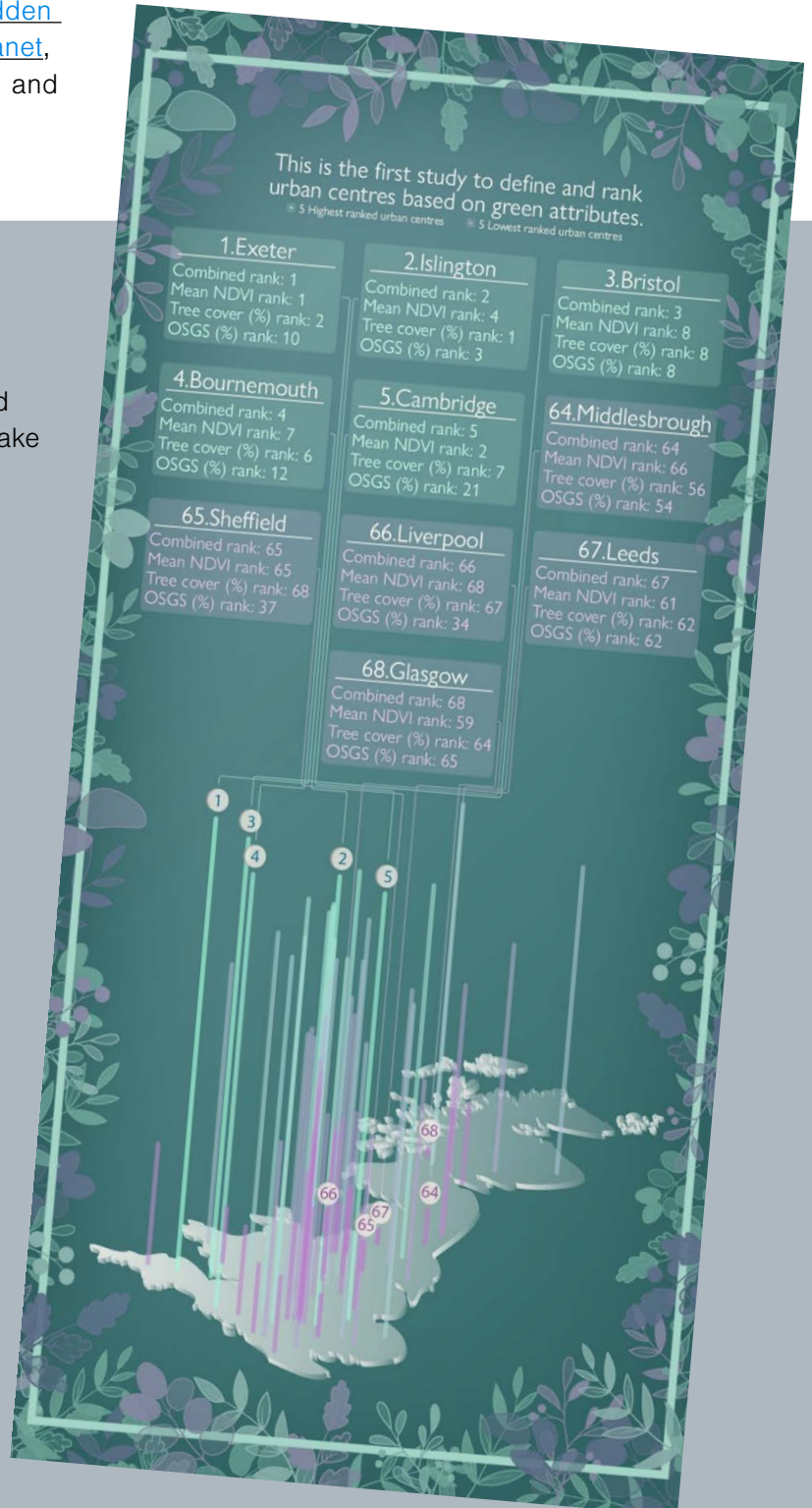
This infographic, for example, shows the 'greenness' of each town and city centre across Great Britain, with green bars showing the greenest centres and purple bars showing the least green centres.

The infographic summarises the highest- and lowest-ranked centres and includes the breakdown of the datasets used to calculate the overall measure of greenness. The top five green centres are mostly in the south of England, compared to the bottom five, which are ex-industrial areas in the north of the country or in Scotland.

- Geovisualisation showing Britain's greenest and least green city centres. Anne-Lise Paris, PLOS, CC-BY 4.0

Use the Society's reputation and convening power to develop and maintain effective networks of influence. (RGS Strategy)

The Society is an active member of the South Ken ZEN+ (Zero Emissions Network) rooted in the [Exhibition Road Cultural Group \(ERCG\)](#), formed with neighbouring organisations. This group, formed in early 2022, exists to share plans and ideas in relation to progressing towards ambitious sustainability objectives.



The Society Director is a member of the steering group, helping to set the strategic direction of the initiative. He also chaired the sustainable travel working group. Relevant members of staff, such as in facilities, event programming and communications, have engaged as relevant with specific sub-initiatives. The group of institutions in the ERCG have the potential to do something significant and distinctive. The initiative is structured around 'Member Declared Contributions' intended to catalyse self-challenge within a mutually supportive framework of advice and information exchange. The network is also structured in such a way as to enable and/or accelerate collaborative initiatives, e.g. around sustainable purchasing, deliveries and waste management, and expanding 'nature positive' estate management across the neighbourhood.

The Society is also one of thirteen members of the [Environmental Policy Forum](#), a by-invitation-only membership group established to provide the opportunity for collaboration, learning, dialogue and debate amongst professionals across the environmental disciplines.

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

Events and exhibitions

[Earth Photo](#), the Society's annual photo competition on geographical themes, again received prominent news coverage in 2022, including in [The Guardian](#). The 2023 shortlisted entries will be presented throughout the summer. These tell powerful stories about our planet, its inhabitants and lands, its beauty and power, and its fragility through the impacts of climate change. The project has been developed jointly by the Society, Forestry England and Parker Harris, and has been supported by Corporate Benefactor Jaguar Land Rover and the charity the Sun Institute.



▲ *The Climate Crisis* by Mohammad Rakibul Hasan, the Overall and People Category winner of Earth Photo 2022



CASE STUDY

Sustainable events: Annual International Conference

Over many years we have thought about how we deliver our Annual Conference in terms of resource use and sustainability, including the waste generated; use of plastics, rare metals and minerals; energy, water and food use (and waste); and carbon used in travel. In our move to hybrid conferencing, we are now able to offer ways to participate remotely online, which has a significant positive impact on making the conference more sustainable.

You can find full details of sustainability at the conference [here](#).

What we have done:

- Eliminate print, working with our exhibitors to significantly reduce the volume of printed materials that they bring to conference.
- Reuse the conference lanyards and plastic pouches at multiple Society events after the conference (we do wash them first!) and recycle the paper inserts.
- Eliminate single use plastic: using refillable water bottles and providing additional facilities to refill them.
- Provide vegetarian and vegan options only. This also reduces wastage and the need to cater for many individual dietary requirements.
- Use renewable resources and fully-recyclable packaging for the lunch boxes. Use of reusable crockery across all tea and coffee serving points.
- Make all sessions hybrid, with 550 delegates joining online out of a total of 1,834 attendees. The estimate of carbon not emitted by international delegates who attended online rather than flying to the event is 779.9 tonnes.



Membership and publications

We continue to encourage Fellows and Members to opt for digital communications over receiving print publications through the post. This is an ongoing campaign with a reduction to only 850 out of circa 15,000 members now receiving print publications. From this year, all of the Society's journals are now only available online.

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

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.



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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. (RGS Strategy)

We have relationships with Corporate Benefactors and Corporate Business Members whose businesses have significant environmental impacts but in areas (e.g. motorised mobility and 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 Partners, we carry out full due diligence on EDI and sustainability policies with potential partners.

CASE STUDY

Earth Stories

Our *Earth Stories* initiative (2023-25) is supporting engagement and action on environment and sustainability issues by bringing together leading climate, biodiversity and sustainability specialists with key media industry figures, as well as top creative talent. Bringing together leading specialists with media industry decision-makers and creative talent is serving to amplify the best available knowledge and practices and refresh storytelling on these vital but often 'tired and tiring' issues linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

On 19 April 2023, the Society convened around 100 broadcast commissioners to consider climate change in the company of leading specialists, including many Fellows and other geographers. Representatives from across the UK broadcasting sector were invited, thanks to close collaboration with BAFTA and the BBC, meaning that key gatekeepers were in attendance.

These meetings also leave the environment and sustainability specialist community with deep insights into the nature of media and cultural production, resulting in improved communication and engagement strategies.

Feedback from attendees included:

"Fantastic, eloquent and engaging experts."

"The breadth in such a short period of time. The approachable atmosphere. Absolutely brilliant - thank you!"

"Really interesting, inspiring and making sure it's in our conscience."

"The speakers on stage were so engaging - the passion was infectious and I feel I learnt so much - so much food for thought!"

"Thought it was excellent - very thought provoking."

Earth Stories will require patient and sustained work and further external funding to achieve its potential. Hence it is being designed as a multi-year programme that will develop and support a broad community, and work closely with cognate disciplines and bodies.

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. (RGS Strategy)

All parts of our building provide challenges in terms of sustainability performance, 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, identified routes to significant fossil-fuel-emissions reductions and improved thermal comfort.

Recent investments have enabled significant reductions (see below) but the larger portions of the task, particularly around energy demand, are ahead of us.

Energy

The single greatest direct 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 (March 2023): "British Gas currently uses 48% renewable energy sources – higher than the UK average at 39%".

Our electricity supplier is EDF, who supply us with electricity that is 100% renewable.

We check our performance annually on [The Carbon Trust's Energy Benchmark Tool](#) to ensure that we are performing within the industry standard. We monitor our energy usage and keep all data related to consumption.

Current and planned improvements to the heating and cooling plant and control systems will introduce long-term efficiency gains. The substantially more efficient condensing boilers installed in 2021, along with new chillers, Air Source Heat Pump and Building Management control system installed in spring/summer 2022, will reduce fossil fuel demand. This reduction will be incremental over the life span of the equipment.

The replacement of our ten ageing gas boilers for six new efficient condensate boilers and the replacement of our two chillers with newer more efficient chillers (which also have an air source heat pump to drive heat back into the heating system) is delivering better than anticipated reductions in fossil fuel demand. Prior to these works we had reinstated the Building Management System (BMS) system to be able to view our output and have greater control over heating and cooling within the building.

The BMS has also been replaced with a newer version with more automated and end user controls to ensure a more efficient use of energy within the building.

To date, the Society has:

- Reduced electricity use by 24% between 2020 and 2021, with a further 2% drop between 2021 and 2022.
- Reduced gas consumption by 49% between 2018 and 2021. There has been a rise of 1.5% between 2021 and 2023 (to date) reflecting increased Society and venue hire use of the building.
- Reduced water usage by 5% between 2022 and 2023 (during 2021 and 2022 there was a 70% increase in water consumption related to our return to the building post COVID-19 lockdowns).



Transport

We seek to support visitors to the building in travelling sustainably and have worked with partners to promote sustainable travel to our site. 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, with most meetings and events now delivered as hybrid or online-only. For example, the on-line audience for Monday night lectures often matches the number in the theatre.

We have introduced a flexible working policy which allows staff to work at home on non-core days if they wish and their role allows. We also have a home working policy where some members of staff can request to be designated as home workers for the majority of their time. These policies reduce staff travel, especially for staff who may live a greater distance from the Society.

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

Where we have control over our own provision (e.g. water and drinks) we are making changes that will deliver sustainability, quality and financial benefits. For example, we now offer filtered water in carafes to displace bottled water, and purchase higher quality wine in large formats served in carafes to reduce waste and improve quality/price ratio for our own events whenever the scale of the event permits this option.

Many of our larger events (e.g. the Annual Conference, Annual Reception, Explore, and Earth Stories events) serve vegetarian/vegan options only. This also helps to reduce wastage associated with catering for many individual dietary requirements.

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 regularly 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. The appointment process gives emphasis to ethical/ESG investment experience, and this has significantly strengthened sustainability-relevant experience on this committee. The appointment process for the investment manager for the Esmond Bradley Martin bequest gave high priority to ESG considerations and the appointed company, Sarasin, are also required to report on these aspects of investment decision making and performance.

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