

# St Hilda's College Sustainability Focus Groups: Summarised Results

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## 1 Rationale and methodology

We (the St Hilda's College Sustainability Working Group) are creating a College Sustainability Strategy for the period from 2024-2035. Community input is critical to this process because (a) the strategy should reflect the values and priorities of all College members, (b) the strategy will be stronger with a wider range of creative solutions, and (c) we believe participation of students and staff will promote engagement in sustainability more widely. To elicit community input at the start of this process, we distributed a survey to the entire College community and followed up with smaller focus groups of students and staff.

The focus groups were designed to supplement the survey results by going more in-depth on certain topics for which simple descriptive statistics would be insufficient. General questions of interest included:

1. What is the responsibility of the College vs. the responsibility of individuals?
2. What sacrifices are we willing to make for sustainability?
3. Does the College need a mandate from students before it makes sustainability decisions?

We held five 1-hour focus groups between 6 and 14 November 2023. Two groups were MCR-only (n = 6, n = 5), two groups were JCR-only (n = 8, n = 6), and one group was

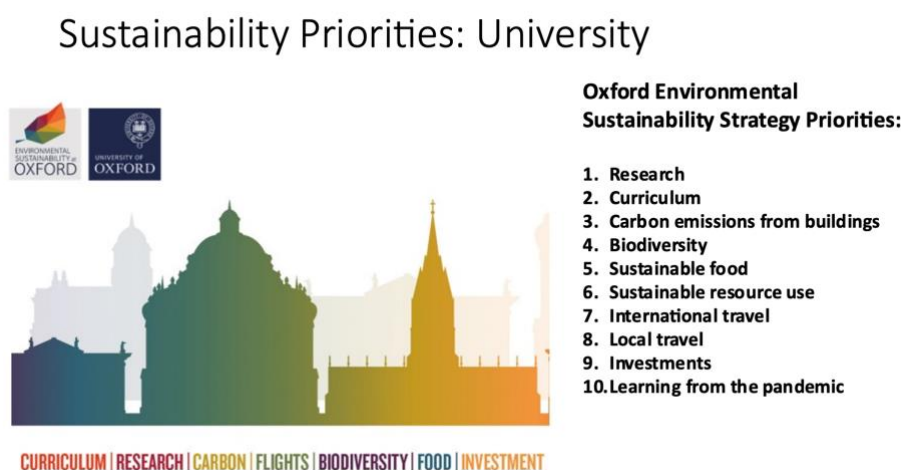
staff/fellows-only (n = 8). All groups were moderated by Jonathan Rutter, with additional support and note-taking by Philippa Hulley (1 MCR, 1 staff/fellows) or Cato Kienhuis (1 MCR, 2 JCR). Focus groups were held in a room next to the dining hall during lunch or dinner, so that participants could eat during the discussion. We recruited participants by first contacting people who had expressed interest through the survey, then through an email and WhatsApp campaign the week before the focus groups started. We incentivised participation by reimbursing all students £6 for their meal and providing a complimentary jar of jam to all staff members.

During each focus group, we began with a brief introduction in which everyone introduced themselves, and Jonathan presented some background on the St Hilda's Sustainability Strategy. We encouraged participants to treat the focus group not as an interview, but as a discussion in which they could ask their own questions and converse with other participants. Subsequent discussion varied among groups, but all groups generally touched on the themes of Sustainability priorities, Food, and Paying for sustainability. We began each of these themes with 1-2 slides to provide some context, including preliminary results from the survey. The following sections of this report include the contextual slides we showed to participants, a summary of the discussion themes, and specific ideas for sustainability solutions that emerged during discussion.

## 2 Sustainability Priorities

### Context

We opened discussion for this section with slides explaining the University of Oxford’s Environmental Sustainability Strategy priorities, and the results from the survey question that asked how important each priority should be for St Hilda’s:



### Sustainability Priorities: College

	JCR	MCR	SCR	Staff
1. Research	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.7
2. Curriculum	2.8	3.4	2.9	3.3
3. Carbon	4.2	4.1	4.4	4.1
4. Biodiversity	3.9	4.1	4.3	3.8
5. Food	3.6	3.9	4.1	3.7
6. Resource Use	4.1	4.1	4.3	3.9
7. International Travel	3.4	3.2	3.4	3.7
8. Local Travel	3.6	3.5	3.9	3.7
9. Investments	3.9	4.1	4.1	3.7
10. Pandemic	3.5	3.8	3.7	4.0

We then asked respondents whether they agreed with the survey results, or if anything surprised them.

### Priorities in general

- Staff/fellows agreed that College should focus on issues over which it has the most control, and not those controlled by uni and city council.
- Many participants emphasised that College should prioritise shifting norms and transforming society by promoting everyday engagement with sustainability.
- Many participants commented on the relatively low rating of Curriculum by College members. MCR members agreed that this should be lower priority, because it is more of a departmental responsibility and academic loads are already heavy.

Staff/fellows believed it should be higher priority, because we are an educational institution and we host educational fora beyond coursework (e.g., guest lectures).

- MCR and JCR members emphasised the importance of clarifying College vs. individual responsibility for many priorities. For example, food and travel require personal sacrifice, which may explain their lower priority.
- Some staff/fellows worried that committing to net zero and failing could bring reputational damage, even if emissions reductions were meaningful.

#### *Length of priority list*

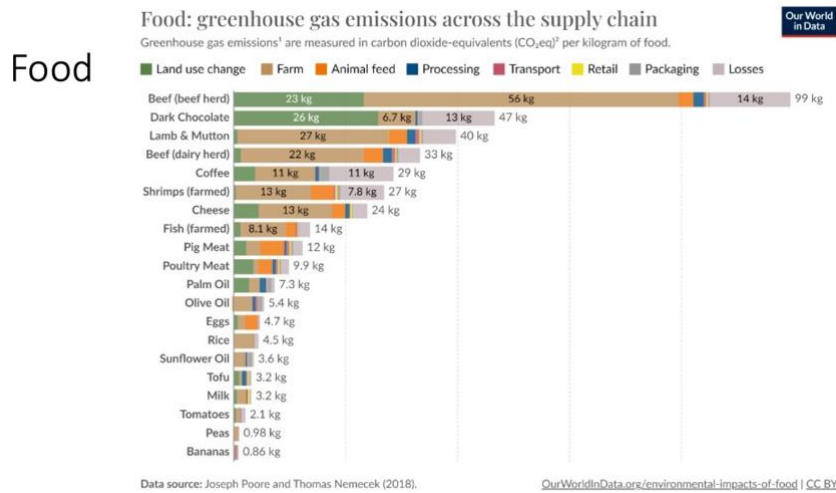
- There were mixed opinions on whether Oxford's list of 10 priorities should be shortened. Many students and staff favoured narrowing the list down, and noted the considerable overlap between some priorities.
- However, some students suggested keeping the list long, but weighting it by importance (e.g., prioritise three main topics, or rank by magnitude of impact).

#### *Specific Ideas*

1. Send out a sustainability email at the start of each term that shows Goals/Action by College/Facilities/What you can do.
2. Have sustainability training courses similar to consent training. Would need to be mandatory, or more ideally, incentivised.
3. Have a 'philosophy of sustainability' workshop where people share their idea of sustainability to get more insight. Could also send out more in-depth survey to supplement the overall survey, for people that are interested.
4. Look into getting St Hilda's spots on NERC DTP in Environmental Research (look into "Pathway to Sustainability").
5. Pay for 100% of public transit (for staff?)
6. College funding for non-plane travel to conferences in Europe
7. Discussion groups and/or online newspaper/blog to promote more conversation about sustainability things we can do.
8. 3x per year dedicated sustainability talk, led by students
9. More outreach events, accessible events (garden talks)
10. Make bus travel free or subsidised for staff

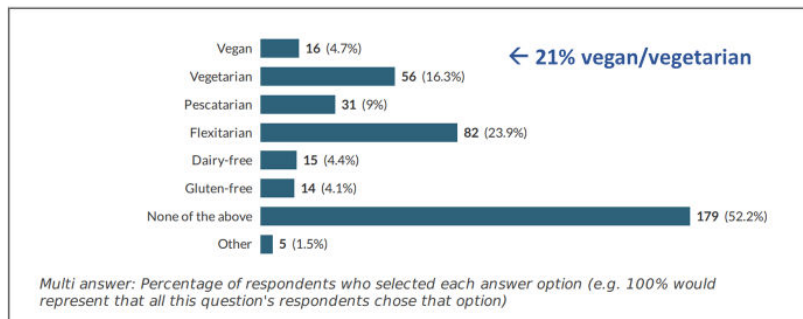
### 3 Food

We opened discussion for this section with slides depicting greenhouse gas emissions from different food items across their supply chains (from Poore & Nemecek, 2018, *Science*; OurWorldInData.org/environmental-impacts-of-food), and the survey results on dietary restrictions in College:



### Food

5 How would you describe your eating habits? (Select all that apply, even if not 100% strict about your diet.)



### Responsibility of College

- JCR members suggested that not all students have a kitchen. Thus, it is not the College's place to dictate food choices.
- Other members countered that meat-free options or meals do not dictate what people eat; meat is just one type of variety. Furthermore, the College is fully responsible for the food in hall, even if it should not influence food choices outside.
- There was a general sense that the College is responsible for providing a variety of food options. However, meat is just one type of variety; College must also consider culture, religion, and dietary needs (including iron).

- One JCR member suggested meat-free should be framed as a divestment from the meat industry, not a decision about free choice.
- As an educational institution, the College should try to teach people the long-term habit of eating less meat. However, sub-par vegetarian options may have the opposite effect.
- There was considerable discussion about food waste reduction in hall; students were highly concerned about this and had many specific ideas (below).
- Important to quantify food impacts in hall, and to understand to what extent people come for economic vs. taste reasons.

### Meat-free days

We opened discussion for this topic with a slide depicting people’s likelihood of going to hall for a meat-free meal, compared to when meat is served:

#### Food: Meat-free meals



There was a wide range of views on meat-free meals, including:

- Positive feedback: Students and staff acknowledged that meat-free meals encourage people to think about what they are eating. Other students expressed satisfaction with the current status quo (6 meat-free meals, 1 meat-free day).
- Negative feedback: Students recognised many drawbacks to meat-free meals, including leakage of profits and carbon impacts to outside college, and loss of sense of community when people avoid hall. There was general consensus that many people avoid hall on meat-free days, largely because vegetarian options are considered less desirable than meat.
- Students are very sensitive to taste, variety, and price. Participants across all groups, including vegetarians, pointed to sub-par taste and variety of meat-free options as a reason for lower turnout. (However, some participants also acknowledged that Hilda’s meat-free options are often delicious.) Participants were also in agreement that changing prices would change behaviour.
- Meat-eaters often feel that meat-free days limit their choices, whereas vegans feel that meat-eaters always have a choice while meat options limit their own choices.

### *Specific ideas*

1. Hold a veggie meal competition to promote student engagement in meat-free menu (similar to formal hall menu competition), and to improve veggie meals in long term
2. Keep or increase meat-free meals but remove the meat-free day, to make them less predictable (students and staff both suggested this).
3. Opinion polls/regular surveys on menus to get sense of what people like
4. Serve more chicken and fish than beef (could have beef-free day as intermediate)
5. Deliberately make meat options less appealing
6. Dilute amount of meat per portion
7. Subsidise veggie options, increase price of meat options (many people suggested this)
8. Lean into veggie options that are more popular (risotto, quiches, mince meat)
9. Food waste ideas:
  - a. Allow students to come with Tupperware at 8pm for discounted leftovers.
  - b. If possible to track, allow for discounted seconds to reduce over-serving.
  - c. Increase availability of “sides” so that people can take smaller cheaper portions
  - d. Could instead serve standardized portions
  - e. Improve statistics and accounting for food waste
  - f. Re-use food the next day (Merton does this)
  - g. Advertise the amount of food wasted each week (Teddy Hall does this)
  - h. Serve leftovers at discount price
  - i. Introduce food waste recycling
10. Reduce amount of meat at each meal (fewer options, or deliberately run out)
11. Cut out beef entirely (or switch to dairy beef in interim)
12. Dilute amount of meat in each dish (over time, increase potato and reduce beef in stew)
13. Communicate amount of protein in meat-free options
14. Increase variety of plant-based options (right now a lot of beans, tomatoes, aubergines)
15. Quantify food waste and financial gains; compare meat and meat-free days to understand losses on meat-free days.
16. Have information about carbon footprint of each food item or say “If you eat this instead of this, you’d be saving x amount carbon”. Could share on social media or post in hall.
17. Survey for students (esp undergrads) before they enter college, to understand their dietary requirements
18. Replicate “meat-like” dishes that are really good
19. Provide less/lower-impact meat every day (e.g. fish korma)
20. Local food supports local farmers – source food more locally for this reason, even if carbon emissions reduction is small
21. Make vegetarian food more visually appealing (esp. main courses)

22. Structure of dining hall programme could be reconsidered. Currently, leakage happens because we basically pay in cash (less incentive to stay in hall). Also, people serve themselves, which incentivises taking more food that could be wasted.



## 4 Paying for Sustainability

We opened discussion for this section by presenting the example of retrofitting windows in Garden Building. We explained that these would cost £15,000 per window to retrofit, an example of how tangible decarbonisation efforts can be extremely expensive. We then presented a slide depicting a simplified list of ways that the College can raise money for such sustainability initiatives:

### Paying for Sustainability

The College can raise money for sustainability initiatives through...

- More donations
- Cutting spending
- Raising prices for students
- Greater return on investments



**Current "green" policy:** Invest in fossil fuel companies if they prove their commitment to fully shifting to renewable energy

**"Very green" policy:** No investment in fossil fuels

### *Donations*

We discussed donations in the staff/fellows focus group only. Thoughts included:

- We need to be bold, principled, and evidence-based in our sustainability goals – this is attractive to both donors and students.
- Providing evidence of how far short we are falling budget-wise to attain sustainability goals could be a good motivator for donors
- We do not currently have a sustainability-specific fundraising campaign.

### *Cutting spending and raising prices*

- All groups forcefully emphasised that the College should not raise prices for students to pay for sustainability initiatives. Many students cannot afford this and will suffer as a result.

### *College investments*

In some groups, we opened further discussion on the College investment policy by explaining that the College's current investment portfolio provides some leeway for investment in high-emitting companies that may also bring in higher returns (see bottom of slide above). General thoughts included:

- Students have little faith that companies are actually doing what they say they are doing with regards to sustainability, and would like clearer evidence of their progress

towards environmental commitments before they can support investment. MCR students enquired whether there might be a more reliable assessment tool.

- Several students in multiple groups enquired how much money the College would lose by adopting a stricter environmental investment policy. We explained this may vary considerably year by year, but students felt this information was critical to making an informed decision on this issue.
- Students pointed out that it would come across as hypocritical for College to invest in unsustainable companies while asking students to make individual sacrifices.
- Some students expressed support for sticking with current portfolio if we are clearly lacking in funds. One student suggested that given the choice between net zero by 2035 or a strictly ethical investment portfolio, the College should lean towards net zero because it is more tangible and encourages support from individuals.

### *Specific ideas*

1. Estimate costs of very green vs green investment portfolios so it is easier to calculate the tradeoff.
2. Voluntary sustainability contribution added to battels (£2-10, can opt out)
3. Translate reductions in e.g. heating to reductions in rent or small reimbursement to incentivise (on collective level, as individual level would be unfair)
4. Look into full university Sustainability Fund to help pay for more expensive things
5. Charge for utilities rather than including them in rent (however, general discussion decided this was not a good idea, as too unfair on some students)
6. Shift Iffley gym cost to sustainability fee (however, other students countered that a gym membership is expensive to get by yourself)
7. Name your window: Offer alumnae to pay to replace their former window with triple glazing and get it named after them.

## 5 Miscellaneous

Focus group discussions occasionally veered off on a tangent, and we also encouraged participants to raise their own sustainability concerns and ideas towards the end of each session. From these conversations, we gained insight on several sustainability topics that were not planned beforehand.

### *Waste management*

- Some buildings lack recycling bins, all buildings lack food waste bins.
- One of the most limiting factors for good waste management is student attitudes (indifference about recycling leads to contamination). Students acknowledged it is difficult for college to affect this, but stressed its importance.
- Need for more understanding of what happens to waste after it is collected, even if it goes in the right bin.

### *Communication*

- MCR members critiqued the lack of up-front communication on sustainability by the College. Suggestion to frame messaging from college more as this is what we are doing and you could do this to help. This way, the onus is not entirely on students.
- MCR members emphasised we need to make sustainability more accessible (financial, racial, disabilities). Currently, sustainability comes across as a luxury. Lowering temperatures or adjusting food options should be done with consideration to medical concerns and accessibility.
- Staff/fellows believed communications should emphasise the benefits of sustainability (it is not a sacrifice) and provide plentiful info (links on website, ways to reduce meat).
- JCR members encouraged thinking about the “mental load” of sustainability, including welfare related to climate anxiety and avoiding shaming people for personal decisions.

### *Water and Energy*

- General critique on bedrooms and library being too hot. Smart radiators are automatically set to 18°C at night, so many people sleep with window open.
- General critique of the water temperature and quality in Wolfson Building.

### *Other topics*

- One student identified what they saw as low hanging fruit for college: Changing meat type in hall, waste management, heating inefficiencies.

- College stash identified as unsustainable
- General interest in how to make the gardens/sites more biodiverse. The gardeners are happy to work with students to find ways to promote biodiversity on-site without simply letting an otherwise useful lawn grow wild.
- Staff/fellows noted Biodiversity is often an afterthought next to carbon because it is hard to define and quantify; we could consider “Nature” as a more relatable term.

### *Specific ideas*

1. Waste management
  - a. 2024 could be Year of Recycling
  - b. Larger bins: When they fill up, no need to contaminate another bin
  - c. Separate bins spatially to reduce contamination
  - d. More signs on bins
  - e. Students could be responsible for food waste bins themselves
  - f. Ensure recycling bins available everywhere.
  - g. Worm farms in college accommodations, to encourage more engagement in food waste recycling.
  - h. More training on waste management and recycling (especially helpful for international students)
  - i. We should get rid of bin bags for recycling (or at least get the colours right – black bin bags are not recyclable)
  - j. Too good to go or half-price meals for yesterday's meals in hall
  - k. Email about recycling at beginning of term (handbook is not enough) with accompanying printout in kitchens.
  - l. If halls can donate food to charity (to reduce food waste), we should consider this too
  - m. Encourage students to reduce/share their incoming packages
  - n. Hire/appoint a recycling sabbatical officer to oversee unified waste management strategy
2. Communication
  - a. Improve the student handbook and advocate sustainability more (if Hilda's is loud and proud about sustainability, students will become that too)
  - b. Hang up and send out list about expectations in relation to sustainability. E.g. an email at the beginning of term with table of College expectations, what College is doing, what individuals should be doing.
  - c. Always make sustainability the default option.
  - d. Consider welfare specific to climate anxiety.
3. Water and Energy
  - a. Install more dishwashers in College accommodation.
  - b. Reduce temperature in library, especially basement.
4. Other topics
  - a. Re-sale of stash (2nd hand scheme to reduce resource use)

- b. Start a garden society, like weed patches etc. with the gardens (based on Lincoln College)
- c. Install swift boxes, make sure to work around insulation so retrofitting does not disrupt birds.
- d. Gardeners should use local vegetation (from wood) rather than buying.
- e. Set aside space for allotments (although may be impractical)
- f. Gardeners should contact Judy Webb from Lye Valley