Q & A WITH
Dr Louise Ellis
— Director of Sustainability

Q: Is sustainability at Leeds all about what happens on campus?
A: What happens on our campus is really important, but sustainability isn’t just about what happens here. It’s about our students, staff and visitors and how they interact with what we’re doing, our initiatives and research. It doesn’t stop when we step off campus.

We take our responsibility to our local communities really seriously and we aim to have a positive impact beyond our campus. This can be an economic benefit through employment at the University; environmental impact, such as the way we travel and operate; and a social impact through our programmes to bring equal educational opportunities to all. We see it very much as our civic duty to be an active partner within Leeds – and we work closely with Leeds City Council and third sector organisations to do just that. Sustainability addresses global challenges, and their impact on the local level and beyond. That’s why it’s vital that we are an active member in our local, national and global communities.

Q: What has been the biggest achievement this year?
A: It’s not a single project or piece of research, it’s the fact we’ve maintained the breadth and depth of activity. It shows real commitment that there are so many different aspects of sustainability going on across the University, and that we continue to be bold and challenging.

Q: You’ve been the Director of Sustainability since 2012. What changes have you seen in that time?
A: The environment in which we operate has undergone huge changes. Take Brexit for one. The world’s a different place. But against that backdrop, there’s also been an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary work that addresses global challenges. Our commitment to sustainability has always been high, and we have never wavered from that. If anything, we’re even more committed.

Q: Targets have been missed in some areas, why is this?
A: In our Sustainability Strategy we set ourselves stretch commitments, which were always going to be challenging to meet. However, there are a number of reasons why we have missed some of these. The physical changes we’ve seen on campus were not always known or accounted for in our initial targets, but it’s encouraging that sustainability has been integrated into these. In some cases, the way we work has changed, which has affected results. For example, we now measure carbon associated with our generating station as inputs rather than outputs. It may seem like a small shift, but it generates higher – yet more honest – figures.

Q: How much can people make a difference? Or is it all about technology?
A: Technology plays a huge part, but people make a difference in all kinds of ways. From the way we commute to the research topics we choose, our approach to sustainability is about individual actions and community impact.

Q: Do you benchmark yourself against other universities?
A: We do look at the rest of our sector, and you can see how we’re doing on page 28 of this report! It’s incredibly useful to see how we’re performing against others in the same position, but it doesn’t drive our approach. Our vision and materiality assessment inform our strategy. It’s uniquely Leeds and we’re proud of our achievements so far.

Q: In an ever-changing environment – both in the university sector and beyond – what drives you?
A: Working in sustainability in an organisation that is fundamentally based on principles of sustainability is a good place to be, and there are three key things that drive me personally. One, I believe completely in the need for a sustainable society. We’re not there yet… and we all have a part to play. Two, universities have an important role in society. They are based on social responsibility and social good and these are intrinsically linked to sustainability. And three, we have an amazing team in the Sustainability Service and get to work with really engaged people across the University. And that’s something I will never take for granted.

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