SCOTLAND BEYOND NET ZERO

SCALING UP AMBITION – 2026-2029

1. Summary

Scotland Beyond Net Zero (SBNZ) is dedicated to tackling Scotland's climate and environmental challenges by facilitating impactful research and partnerships. From 2026 to 2029, SBNZ will focus on developing projects that address critical questions related to net zero and just transition goals. A major objective is to **develop collaborations that can attract funding for large-scale ideas that can lead to significant research collaborations**, enhancing policy influence in Scotland and beyond. This strategy focuses on two new challenge areas – **energy & society** and **natural systems** – in addition to our existing focus areas of **food** and **finance**.

2. The challenge

Scotland Beyond Net Zero was created to convene, support and amplify high-impact research, partnerships and collaborative activities that help drive solutions to Scotland's climate and environment challenges. We also provide a platform to showcase expertise across our six priority themes, and thereby catalyse external partnerships for co-created net zero research and innovation.

We have a new financial model for 2026-2029, and have decided to direct our focus for the next three years on:

- Catalysing collaborative research projects aimed at addressing critical questions related to advancing Scotland's net zero and just transition goals. These will focus on one or more of

SBNZ's six core themes. We aim for many of these initiatives and stakeholder connections to grow into self-sustaining efforts that extend beyond the project's initial scope.

- Attracting funding for a 'big idea' that can create impact at scale, and which can establish and maintain a significant research collaboration across our members.
- Increasing our members' influence in policy development in net zero and just transition in and beyond Scotland, and co-producing research with policy partners.

To meet these goals, we have agreed to focus our efforts on **key challenge areas**. These include:

- **Powering Change with People** (encompassing just energy transition, countering the net zero backlash, community benefits and energy finance);
- **Creating a Nature Positive Scotland** (including land use, nature restoration, co-benefits and peatland and forest restoration);
- **A Unifying Framework for Scotland's Sustainable Transition** (encompassing issues including skills, labour market transition, blended finance, economic co-benefits).
- **A Just Transition for Agriculture** (further developing the food theme lead's work on sustainable diets)

To facilitate collaboration across these areas and meet our key goals, SBNZ will focus efforts on opportunities for collaboration, scaling up and connecting seed fund collaborations, strategic communications and government relations, creating and supporting academic theme leads, and creating opportunities for co-creation with external partners.

3. Our distinctive ambition

SBNZ is a response to the growing momentum across government, research councils, and society to tackle climate and net zero challenges. Building on the strengths of existing initiatives and

adding a distinctive focus on climate change, we bring together expertise from across disciplines to address one of the most pressing issues of our time. Rather than focusing on individual sectors or disciplines, SBNZ connects and amplifies work across the research landscape, creating new opportunities for collaboration and innovation. Our distinctive offer is using our convening power to facilitate collaborations, support co-creation and develop specialist networks.

A national collaboration on the specific challenge of climate change therefore offers benefits not offered by a single institution, including:

- Creating consistent evidence across contrasting places supporting comparative research models) while using our local connections and presence to conduct place-based collaborative research.
- Supporting effective inter and cross-disciplinary work, combining technical insights from engineering, built environment and data technology with social sciences, arts and humanities, law and economics to provide multifaceted insights into climate change's 'wicked problems'.
- Creating and sustaining effective partnerships with communities, business/ industry and government around specific places and research challenges.
- Connecting academic research to national policy and climate investment.

Universities also have a civic mission and offer benefits to society through engaging with difficult challenges. We have a strong position as trusted research leaders who can provide independent research and partnership across society.

4. Actions and outline programme

SBNZ will focus om the three cross-cutting climate challenge areas outlined above. We will:

- **Create and develop new collaborations through the annual SBNZ seed fund**. The SBNZ seed fund is one of SBNZ's flagship programmes. The fund kick-starts promising collaborations across

university researchers and with external partners such as government, community groups or businesses. The funded collaborations create impact in and of themselves, but also provide greater impact and visibility for projects as a collective effort across Scottish universities, foster collaborations that are well-positioned to leverage external funding, and ensure climate research is co-created with government, society and industry.

- **Scale up and connect existing seed fund projects to build collaborations in the key challenge areas**. The seed fund will be increasingly important to identify emerging research and use this to develop larger propositions that SBNZ can support and amplify over the next three years;
- **Build on the success of academic theme leads through appointing new co-leads for thematic areas including natural systems and energy**, with a specific remit to build co-created research, create impact at scale, and build towards a significant funded research agenda;
- **Continue and develop our strategic communications and government relations** to showcase our member's expertise and impact to key audiences, and build our influence with key policy and government audiences;
- **Develop impact case studies that showcase our flagship activities** (such as the seed fund and our research toolkit), enhance funding competitiveness of our collaboration, strengthen our strategic partnerships (such as policy influence) and evidence our growing impact.

5. Team, partnerships and governance

SBNZ will continue to have a **Governing Board,** comprising VPR or equivalent from all members, and holding responsibility for strategic oversight of SBNZ's progress and performance. The **SBNZ Secretariat** will consist of the Senior Partnership Manager with overall responsibility for designing and delivering the strategy, along with administration support when appropriate. We will maintain

our **Steering Group,** which is comprised of academic or professional services leaders with strategic responsibility for climate or sustainability issues in their institution. The Steering Group is responsible for proving the Senior Partnership Manager with advice on decision-making, developing and executing strategic priorities, and providing academic and professional insights. We also have a **Communications and Government Relations Working Group** and a dedicated **Communications Specialist,** and ad hoc working groups when appropriate. We will appoint **Academic Theme leads** who will lead on collaboration, engagement and research development in specific thematic areas.

We will continue to develop our relationships with existing research centres, centres of expertise and research programmes including ClimateXChange, SPEERI, SRAHEL, SCAF etc., working to enhance rather than replace their activities.

Key external partners include local communities, business and trade organisations, Scottish, local and Westminster Governments, UK-wide funders and other universities, and potentially international bodies.

Crucially, SBNZ will focus efforts on developing co-creation and collaboration on research challenges so that when funding becomes available, we have created partnerships, ideas and collaborations that are ready to take advantage. Due to the limited resources of SBNZ, we are not positioning ourselves as offering direct bid support or grant writing services.

6. Outcomes, beneficiaries and measures of success

Principal beneficiaries of specific challenge areas would depend on the ideas pursued. In the case of an energy theme, this could include households facing high heating costs or cold homes and damp; communities affected by or excluded from energy investment; workers and local businesses navigating change; and public bodies responsible for delivery. For collaborations focused on nature,

this could include communities with increased co-benefits or community wealth building from nature, and evidence to support governments responsible for designing land use policy, and new knowledge on models of blended finance for communities.

Measures of success for these specific challenge areas would be evidenced by relevant outputs, including:

- New partnerships supporting relevant initiatives e.g. models for blended finance or sustainable food systems scenarios;
- Sustained partnerships with communities, businesses and government;
- Collaborations which have made initial steps towards delivery of interventions and/ or applications for future funding.

SBNZ-wide success indicators would include:

- Research outputs supporting improvements in relevant areas such as warmer homes, equally accessed community energy systems, or models to support net-gain policy making.
- Increased influence with policymakers at all levels, demonstrated by involvement in policy processed, opportunities for trusted advice, and influence in policy development
- Direct contributions to Scotland's net zero and just transition outcomes, including more sustainable climate finance, clean and accessible energy, sustainable food systems, nature restoration and other areas as appropriate.

7. Immediate next steps

Over the next three months, we will:

1. Appoint two co-leads for natural systems and energy & society to help deliver the challenge areas (four additional theme leads in total);

2. Support existing theme leads in food and finance to continue to develop their challenge areas;
3. Convene working groups (or other relevant infrastructure) to support co-creation against the agreed challenge areas;
4. Map existing Scottish research, collaborations and partnerships to identify genuine gaps and avoid duplication – this will focus on key challenge areas to avoid duplication of previous mapping exercises;
5. Continue with existing engagement and communications including around CoP, and continue ongoing proactive communications, website refresh and case study development.

These activities will refine and sharpen our focus towards the overall objective of SBNZ: A jointly developed and owned programme with potential for impact, focused on a key climate challenge area.