SQA Sustainability Report 2024–25

SQA Environmental

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Introduction

SQA is a leading non-departmental public body operating in Scotland, the UK and internationally, providing products and services in skills, training, and education. SQA recognises that it has a responsibility to the environment beyond legal and regulatory requirements.

We work in an environmentally responsible way, minimising our impact on the environment and leading other organisations and the communities in which we operate by example.

We are committed to reducing our environmental impact and continually improving our environmental performance as an integral part of our business strategy and procedures, targeting a reduction in emissions towards net-zero by 2045, in line with Scottish Government targets.

We achieve this through the three pillars of our environmental strategy:

- continuous improvement: we will maximise opportunities to reduce the environmental impact across all operational activities
- engagement and influence: positively influence and engage with colleagues
- reporting and governance: collect, collate and publish sustainability data to ensure accurate, valuable reporting

Under the reporting and governance pillar, and as part of our commitment to supporting our national climate change duties, we submit an annual report to the Scottish Government on our performance in this area.

Governance

SQA’s Director of People has overall responsibility for environmental management. The Head of Appointee Management reports to the Executive Management Team and Board of Management on environmental matters. The Facilities Manager reports to the Head of Appointee Management and ensures that the organisation works towards the corporate environmental objectives (please see Figure 2: Governance structure).

The Facilities Manager is the focal point for environmental issues and facilitates the Environmental Working Group, which contributes to environmental projects and initiatives.

SQA's Environmental Policy clearly specifies SQA’s aims and objectives for the management of environmental resources, and outlines the roles of senior managers in achieving environmental initiatives and targets. The decision-making structure around environmental matters is not formally laid out in policy or procedures but is determined depending on context, subject and impact.

In SQA’s Strategic Plan, one of the key outcomes is ‘We have a sustainable business operating model that is appropriately resourced to deliver our remit now and in the future’. This is supported by SQA's Environmental Impact Strategy.

The Health, Safety and Environmental Officer compiles monthly emissions figures and progress against SQA’s emissions targets, and these are communicated to the organisation in a quarterly summary.

Environmental Working Group

SQA has an active and prominent Environmental Working Group (EWG) which meets quarterly.

The EWG is chaired by the Facilities Manager and includes the Head of Appointee Management and colleagues from across the business.

At the quarterly meetings, any relevant sustainability matters are discussed, such as:

- emissions data — trends and changes
- legislative changes
- upcoming local / national / global campaigns and initiatives
- volunteering opportunities

EWG members are encouraged to demonstrate environmentally positive behaviours in the workplace and to take the lead on campaigns and initiatives that raise awareness about sustainability, and to promote environmental campaigns and messages to their teams.

Looking back at 2024–25

Carbon emissions

A baseline figure for comparing carbon emissions was set in 2013–14. This was 1,643 tonnes of CO_2 equivalent (tCO_2e). At that time, we set a target to maintain emissions at or under 2013–14 levels.

Travel by road has reduced by 23.6 tCO_2e overall compared with 2023–24, with a 19 tCO_2e reduction in business mileage and a 4 tCO_2e reduction in inter-site mileage. Travel for business by train had a small increase of 0.6 tCO_2e.

Flight emissions have increased overall by 42.5 tCO_2e, with a 20 tCO_2e reduction from domestic flights and an 18 tCO_2e reduction in short haul flights being outweighed by a 63.5 tCO_2e increase from long-haul flights and a 17 tCO_2e increase from international flights. This follows an increased push to drive international business development for SQA, and it should be noted that many international locations do not have workable alternatives to flight in terms of travel. This figure is still a reduction of 82% in comparison to our baseline year.

Our vehicle fleet is made up of one electric vehicle and one hybrid vehicle. These are used primarily for staff and equipment transport between offices or event locations.

Our waste and water emissions across all sites have decreased by a total of 0.8 tCO_2e in comparison to 2023–24, a 27% reduction.

Emissions from electricity use have decreased by 1.9 tCO_2e across all sites since 2023–24, which is attributed to the projects undertaken to replace intumescent lighting with LED panels, and the replacement of the data centre air conditioning unit in the Lowden building. With the recently completed replacement of Optima's data centre air conditioning unit, and further LED lighting replacements, it is anticipated that this figure will continue to reduce.

There was a 43.4 tCO_2e increase from gas usage compared to 2023–24. A partial contribution to this was due to a large usage amendment to the Newtongrange site's records, due to last year's bills being taken from estimated readings. However, the majority of the change is a 26.5 tCO_2e increase from the Optima building. This is most likely due to the uptake of in-house catering.

Internally, we break down our emissions by office-based FTE to account for fluctuations in staffing levels (please see Figure 3: Total emissions and FTE). However, while this includes contractors, it does not include agency colleagues, and this figure is not included in official reporting. Our emissions per full time equivalent for 2024–25 were 0.8 tCO_2e, compared to 1.1 tCO_2e for 2023–24.

Emissions for contracted homeworkers are calculated for the highest monthly homeworking FTE, in accordance with Scottish Government's reporting guidance. For 2024–35, contracted homeworkers accounted for 20 tCO_2e, compared to 2023–24's emissions of 356 tCO_2e. This is due to a reduction in the number of contracted homeworkers at SQA. Please note that an error was found for 2023–24's homeworker figure calculation, and this has now been corrected for this year's reporting.

There is a complete breakdown of emissions sources, as reported to the Scottish Government, in the Appendices (Appendix 3: Figures, Table 3 Breakdown of emissions sources).

Please also see Appendix 4: Emissions factors and formulas for a clearer understanding of how emissions sources are weighted.

Overall, we are pleased to report that we have surpassed our total emissions targets for 2024–25, with a reduction of 804 tCO_2e from our baseline year, a decrease of 49%.

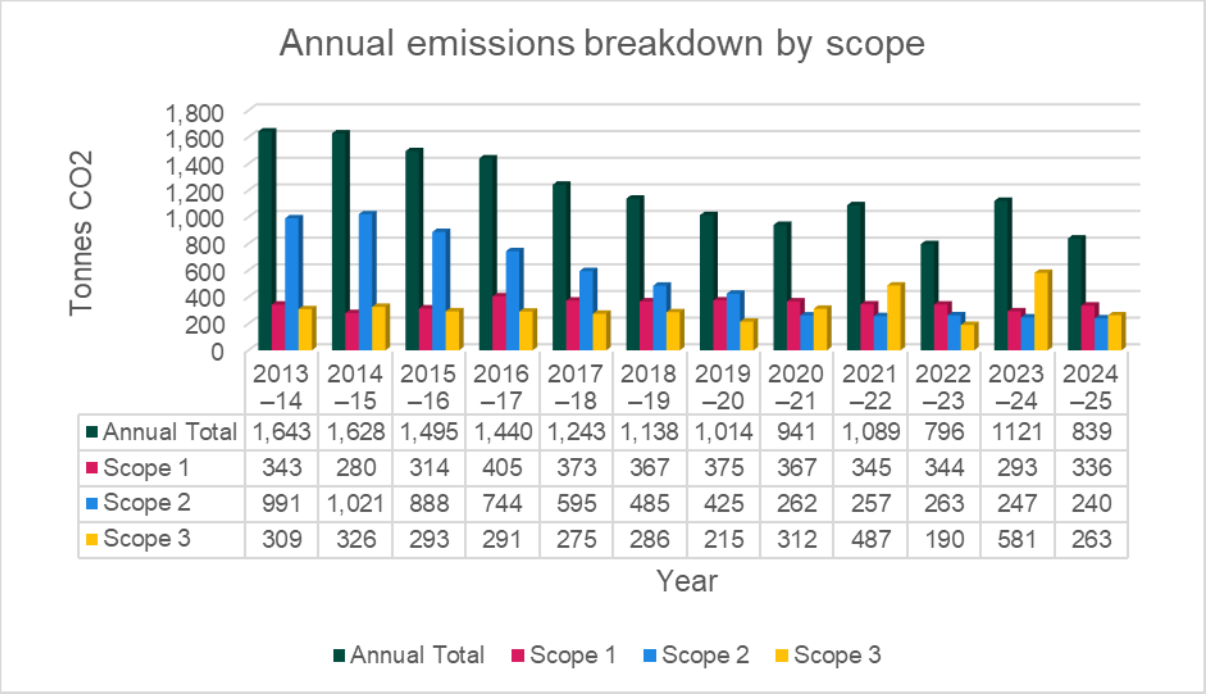
Scope

The convention for emissions reporting is to split emissions into three categories (or 'scopes'), depending on the source of the emissions. Reporting of emissions from Scopes 1 and 2 is mandatory. It is up to the individual organisation to decide what Scope 3 emissions they report on.

Our current scopes are:

- Scope 1: direct combustive emissions — gas and fleet vehicles
- Scope 2: indirect emissions from purchased energy/heat — electricity
- Scope 3: supply-chain emissions — waste, water, business travel, flights, homeworkers

We include waste, water, travel, flights, and homeworkers in our Scope 3 emissions, following the guidance issued to public sector bodies. Most other supply-chain emissions are difficult to control and quantify, and are usually already counted by the supplier in their own operational emissions reporting. However, we do recognise that we should take opportunities to positively influence those suppliers, where possible.



	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25
Annual Total	1,643	1,628	1,495	1,440	1,243	1,138	1,014	941	1,089	796	1121	839
Scope 1	343	280	314	405	373	367	375	367	345	344	293	336
Scope 2	991	1,021	888	744	595	485	425	262	257	263	247	240
Scope 3	309	326	293	291	275	286	215	312	487	190	581	263

Figure 1 Annual emissions by scope

Adaptation

A qualitative risk assessment of threats to the organisation from the current and projected future climate has been carried out. This allowed us to identify and evaluate the climate-related risks that may impact our operations and ascertain the controls we have in place to mitigate these risks.

The current controls have been judged as sufficient, and an annual review will ensure the most up-to-date information on projected climate and potential threats are considered at regular intervals.

In the event of any climate-related incidents, our business continuity planning procedures would be invoked.

Procurement

As part of the procurement process, SQA stipulates that suppliers must meet set environmental standards. Where appropriate, suppliers are evaluated on these criteria as part of the tender-evaluation process.

Incorporating sustainability into SQA's Procurement Policy aligns with SQA's Environmental Policy, and highlights the importance of sustainable procurement opportunities through:

- developing environmentally friendly alternatives
- adopting sustainable processes, goods and services
- extending sustainability improvements throughout the supply-chain
- providing suppliers with feedback and assistance to improve their own sustainable performance

A member of the Procurement Team is part of EWG to help procurement collaboration towards achieving sustainability objectives.

Mechanical and electrical projects

Lighting upgrade programme

Since the last report, the programme of lighting upgrades has progressed, with all lighting in the Lowden building and floors 4, 5, and 6 in the Optima being upgraded to LED light panels. Planning is underway to complete the programme in the SMF building and floors 3 and 7 in the Optima building.

Air conditioning and UPS service upgrade

We made significant changes to the AC and UPS services that supply power to our data centres on both sites. This immediately had a considerable impact on our energy usage.

Articles, campaigns, and events

Several environmental campaigns and initiatives were run during the year:

- Earth Day, 22 April — 2024's theme was 'Plants vs Plastics', aiming to promote a reduction in the use of plastics.
- Second Hand September — A challenge to purchase no new clothing for the month of September, aiming to combat fast fashion.
- World Snake Day, 16 July — A day to learn about and promote understanding of snakes.
- Summer days out to connect with nature — A campaign from members of our Make A Change group, encouraging people to connect with nature over the summer school holidays.
- No Mow May — A campaign from Plantlife, asking people not to mow their lawns during May, allowing for wildflowers to grow and support our ecosystem.
- International Day of Forests, 21 March — Focusing on the Mountain Birch Project, which aims to research and repopulate Scotland's native mountain birch trees.
- Global Recycling Day, 18 March — A day to promote the importance of recycling, both to world leaders and to the general public.
- Big Garden Bird Watch, 26 to 28 January — An event asking members of the public to count and submit the numbers of birds they see in their gardens, helping the RSPB to monitor wild bird populations.
- Climate Week 2024, 23 to 29 September — A collection of articles and posts by various members of the Environmental Working Group, which included tips for reusing and recycling items, sustainable food shopping, and sharing environmental news.

You can see some examples of campaign materials in Appendix 6: Campaigns.

Achievements

On Tuesday 18 March 2025, SQA volunteers spent time at Vogrie Country Park, planting 60 trees and helping to maintain young trees around the park. This was featured in the print copy of the Midlothian Advertiser on the week of 5 May.

We have received positive feedback on our campaigns, and have been tracking colleague engagement with various campaign posts via our intranet. Our best performing posts were:

- ‘Summer days out to connect with nature’, shared to encourage people to get out and about and see our natural spaces, which gained 244 views.
- ‘No Mow May 2024’, asking people to get involved with PlantLife’s challenge to let lawn grow during May, which gained 119 views.
- ‘Join the ‘Second Hand September’ challenge’, promoting moving away from fast fashion and purchasing second-hand clothing, which gained 188 views.

Looking ahead to 2025–26

Top five priorities

These are the top five activities that we intend to focus on:

1. Meet or exceed relevant legislative requirements.
2. Raise awareness of issues around climate change among colleagues to help them to make informed decisions, both at work and away from work.
3. Review operational activities and make changes to reduce our environmental impact.
4. Promote ways to reduce our environmental impact using a diverse range of topics.
5. Set a new baseline year to enable more relevant reporting in future years.

Mechanical and electrical projects

Lighting upgrade programme

Planning is underway to complete the works to upgrade lighting to LED panels across Lowden and Optima. This will reduce our energy consumption, providing increased environmental and financial savings.

The following campaigns and initiatives are planned for 2025–26.

- Earth Day 2025, 22 April — a day for environmental action themed for 2025 on ‘Our Power, Our Planet’.
- No Mow May — an annual campaign from Plantlife asking people not to mow their lawns for the month of May, helping to promote plant biodiversity and sources of wildflowers for our pollinators.
- World Bee Day, 20 May — annual celebrating the importance of bees and pollinators.
- World Refill Day, 16 June — advocating for people to move to refill / reuse systems rather than using disposable options.
- Clean Air Day, 19 June — a day to raise awareness on the importance of reducing air pollution.
- Climate Week, 5 to 11 July — a week of events and campaigns to increase awareness of climate-related issues.
- Recycle Week, 22 to 28 September — an annual reminder of recycling resources, and highlighting any changes to the resources available.
- International Day of Awareness on Food Loss and Waste Reduction, 29 September — promoting a reduction in food waste.
- International e-Waste Day, 14 October — encouraging responsible disposal of small electrical items.

Appendix 1: Statutory duties

The **Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009** is a statutory framework for greenhouse gas emissions reductions in Scotland. Included in the Act are the following requirements on public bodies in the exercising of their functions:

- *Act in the way best calculated to contribute to delivery of Scotland's emissions reduction targets*
- *Act in the way best calculated to deliver any statutory adaptation programme*
- *Act in a way that it considers most sustainable*

The **Climate Change (Duties of Public Bodies: Reporting Requirements) (Scotland) Order 2015** requires public bodies to report annually on compliance with the climate change duties.

The **Climate Change (Duties of Public Bodies: Reporting Requirements) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2020** duties are:

- *where applicable, a target date for achieving zero direct emissions of greenhouse gases, or such other targets that demonstrate how the body is contributing to Scotland achieving its emissions reduction targets*
- *where applicable, any targets for reducing indirect emissions of greenhouse gases*
- *how the body aligns its spending plans and use of resources to contribute to reducing emissions and delivering its emissions reduction targets*
- *how the body will publish, or otherwise make available, its progress towards achieving its emissions reduction targets*
- *how the body is contributing to Scotland's Adaptation Programme*

These new reporting requirements support the priorities identified for climate change governance, management and strategy identified as part of this Sustainability Report and given in the previous section.

Appendix 2: Governance structure

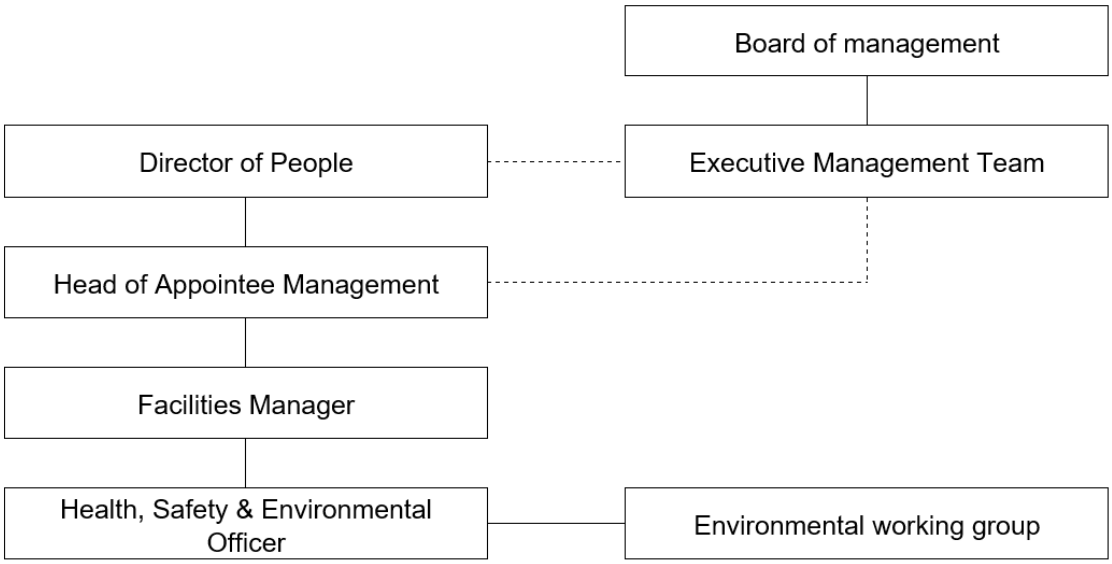


Figure 2: Governance structure

Appendix 3: Figures

Year	Scope 1	Scope 2	Scope 3	Annual Total	Change from baseline	tCO_2e per FTE
2013–14	343	991	309	**1,643**	**-**	2.09
2014–15	280	1,021	326	**1,628**	**-1%**	1.92
2015–16	314	888	293	**1,495**	**-9%**	1.78
2016–17	405	744	291	**1,440**	**-12%**	1.71
2017–18	373	595	275	**1,243**	**-24%**	1.35
2018–19	367	485	286	**1,138**	**-31%**	1.22
2019–20	375	425	215	**1,014**	**-38%**	1.12
2020–21	367	262	312	**941**	**-43%**	1.01
2021–22	345	257	487	**1,089**	**-34%**	1.14
2022–23	344	263	190	**796**	**-52%**	0.80
2023–24	293	247	581	**1121**	**-32%**	1.05
2024–25	336	240	263	**839**	**-49%**	0.82

Note: Homeworking emissions included from 2020–21 and flights from 2021–22.

Table 1 Figures (tCO2e)

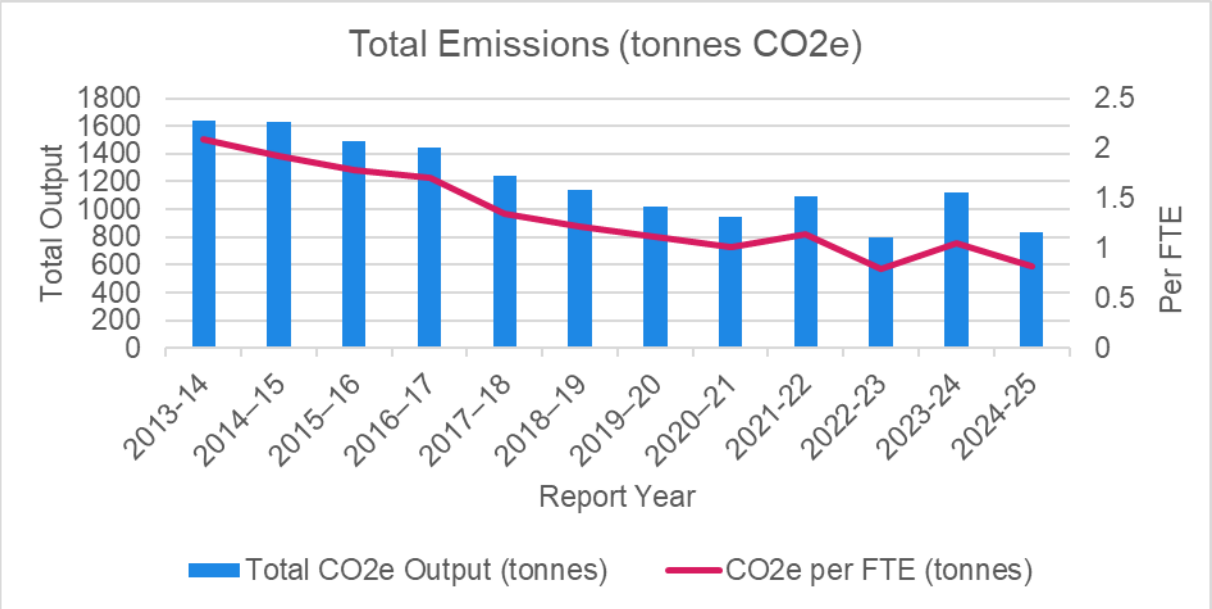


Figure 3: Total emissions and FTE

Emission Source	Units	Emission factor 2024	Units	Scope	Source
Grid Electricity (generation + T&D)	kWh	0.22535	kg CO2e/kWh	2	Lighting
Natural Gas	kWh	0.18290	kg CO2e/kWh	1	Heating
Water - Supply	m3	0.15311	kg CO2e/m3	3	Water
Water - Treatment	m3	0.18574	kg CO2e/m3	3	Water
Paper & Board (Mixed) Recycling	tonnes	6.41061	kgCO2e/tonne	3	Confidential Waste
WEEE (Mixed) Recycling	tonnes	6.41061	kgCO2e/tonne	3	WEEE
Plastics (Average) Recycling	tonnes	6.41061	kgCO2e/tonne	3	DMR
Refuse Mun/Comm/Ind to Combustion	tonnes	6.41061	kgCO2e/tonne	3	General Waste
Batteries Recycling	tonnes	6.41061	kgCO2e/tonne	3	
Domestic Flight - Average passenger	passenger km	0.27257	kg CO2e/passenger km	3	
Short Haul Flights - Average passenger	passenger km	0.18592	kg CO2e/passenger km	3	
Long Haul Flights - Average passenger	passenger km	0.26128	kg CO2e/passenger km	3	
International Flights - Average passenger	passenger km	0.17580	kg CO2e/passenger km	3	
Rail - National Rail	passenger km	0.03546	kg CO2e/passenger km	3	
Car - Petrol - Average - unknown engine size	km	0.16450	kgCO2e/km	3	Inter-site/Business
Car - Hybrid - average mileage	km	0.12607	kgCO2e/km	3	Fleet
Bus - local bus, not London	passenger km	0.10846	kg CO2e/passenger km	3	Never used
Taxi - Black cab	passenger km	0.20402	kg CO2e/passenger km	3	Taxis
Ferry - Average passenger	passenger km	0.11270	kg CO2e/passenger km	3	Never used
Homeworking (office equipment + heating)	per FTE Working Hour	0.33378	kgCO2e/per FTE Working Hour	3	Designated Homeworkers

Table 2 Breakdown of emissions sources

Appendix 4: Emissions factors and formulae

Each year, the UK Government releases new emissions factors which are used to convert usage figures to the equivalent CO_2 emissions.

Some examples of frequently used emissions factors and formulae for calculating emissions are given below:

Natural gas emissions (tCO_2e)

$$= \frac{\text{Gas consumption (kWh)} \times \ 0.18254 \text{ (kg } CO_2e/kWh)}{1000}$$

Rail emissions (tCO_2e)

$$= \frac{\text{Distance travelled (km)} \times 0.03549 \text{ (kg } CO_2e/km)}{1000}$$

Emission factor examples

Emission source	Units	Emission factor 2021	Emission factor 2022	Units
Natural gas	kWh	0.18316	0.18254	kg CO2e/kWh
Average car - Unknown	km	0.17148	0.17067	kg CO2e/km
Electricity: UK	kWh	0.21233	0.19338	kg CO2e/kWh
Transmission and distribution - Electricity: UK	kWh	0.01879	0.01769	kg CO2e/kWh
National rail	passenger.km	0.03549	0.03549	kg CO2e/passenger.km
Average car - Unknown	km	0.17148	0.17067	kg CO2e/km
Black cab	passenger.km	0.20416	0.20416	kg CO2e/passenger.km
Water supply	cubic metres	0.11000	0.10000	kg CO2e/cubic metres
Water treatment	cubic metres	0.23000	0.19000	kg CO2e/cubic metres
Paper and board: board - Recycled	tonnes	21.29357	21.28019	kg CO2e/tonnes
Plastics: average plastics - Recycled	tonnes	21.29357	21.28019	kg CO2e/tonnes
Municipal/Domestic waste - Combustion	tonnes	21.29357	21.28019	kg CO2e/tonnes
Flights - Domestic, to/from UK - Average passenger	passenger.km	0.24587	0.24587	kg CO2e/passenger.km
Homeworking (office equipment + heating)	FTE Working Hour	0.30000	0.34075	kg CO2e/FTE Working Hour

Table 3 Emissions factor examples

Appendix 5: Campaigns

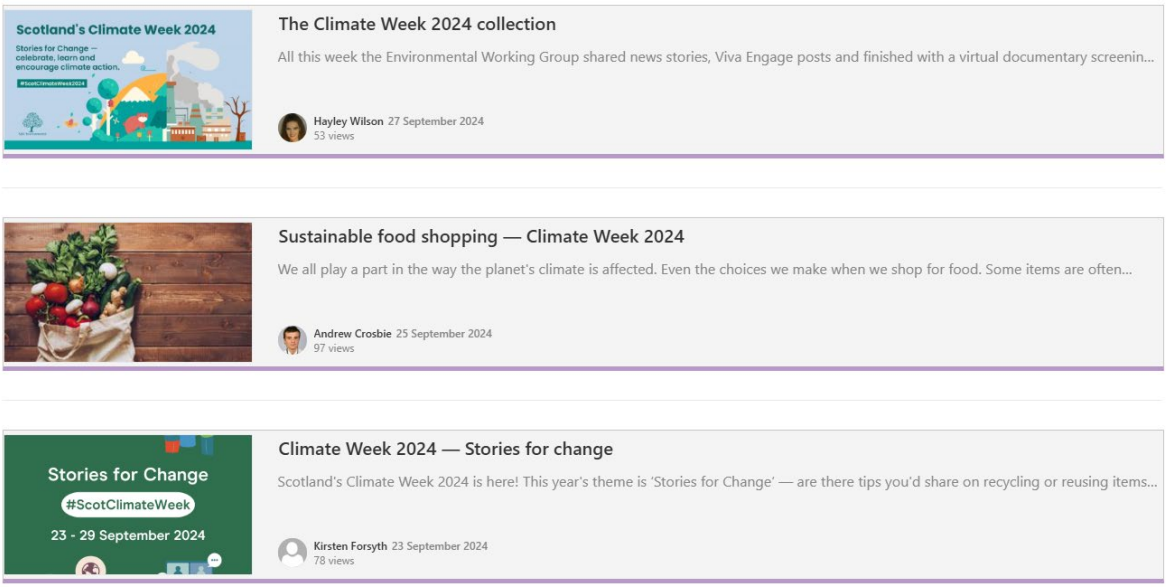


Figure 4 Environmental Campaign Examples