

Draft Infrastructure Investment Plan – 2021-22 to 2025-26 – Colleges Scotland Comments

Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the collective voice for the college sector in Scotland, representing its interests and ensuring that colleges are at the heart of a world class education sector that is recognised, valued and available to all. Colleges Scotland, as the membership body, represents all 26 colleges in Scotland, which deliver both further education and around 26% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

Having previously provided evidence to the Infrastructure Commission for Scotland during its Call for Evidence in the first half of 2019, we welcome the opportunity to provide views and feedback on the Draft Infrastructure Investment Plan and the vision it establishes for Scotland's future infrastructure.

As part of this we are keen to give our views around the ways in which the Scottish Government is planning to implement the Commission's recommendations from the Phase One report, in order to help deliver and implement the right future infrastructure priorities for an inclusive, net zero emissions economy in Scotland.

We say this because, as the national organisation for colleges in Scotland, we believe that the sector has a vital role to play in both the development and delivery of infrastructure in Scotland. Across the sector our members are large users of infrastructure, in terms of the college learning estate, and the digital infrastructure underpinning wider learning on digital and virtual platforms.

Of equal importance, colleges are a key delivery partner for the workforce who construct and maintain infrastructure across Scotland, delivering high-quality technical education courses to provide workers with the skills that are required for them to hold successful careers in infrastructure related roles.

We note in the consultation paper that the Scottish Government has considered the feedback received by the Commission in response to its Call for Evidence, and that it does not seek to repeat this engagement. However, in order for Colleges Scotland to provide our informed views on how the Scottish Government is planning to implement the Commission's recommendations, we believe it is important to take this opportunity to raise the current college sector context with regards to capital and infrastructure.

Current College Sector Infrastructure Context

Concerns have been expressed across the college sector that current infrastructure is not fit for purpose and is hindering students' experience and learning opportunities. Simultaneously, a number of colleges currently cannot afford to maintain their buildings, as the current capital funding allocations are not sufficient enough to address the current costs, and there is a need for this to be addressed.

These sentiments are evidenced by the latest reporting on the condition of the college sector infrastructure, as presented in various documents published by the Scottish Government, Scottish Funding Council (SFC), and the independent conclusions of Audit Scotland.

The Scottish Government's [Learning Estates Strategy](#), published in September 2019, has itself referenced that, in spite of the previous investments in the college sector, the SFC's review of college estate in late 2017 classified approximately one-third of the college estate as in poor condition. The figure has since fallen to around one-quarter after taking into consideration investment in the sector estate since that date. To place that into context, the college estate covers a total of 1 million square metres – equivalent to 140 football pitches.

Similarly, Audit Scotland in its [Scotland's colleges 2019](#) report identified that current levels of Scottish Government capital funding are insufficient to address colleges' maintenance requirements, and that in 2019/20, capital funding for the sector had fallen to £47.6 million.

The SFC published its [Estate Conditions Survey](#) in December 2017, which provided evidence for the level of backlog maintenance costs required by the college sector. Colleges Scotland is requesting sufficient funding to meet the college sector's backlog maintenance requirements. The survey demonstrated that the cost to bring college buildings to Level B conditions (backlog maintenance) would be £360 million over a five-year period. Taking into account the resources provided to date, the balance required to complete the identified work is **£225m**, taking into account those backlog maintenance costs offset by actual new capital investment. Reduced capital spending creates a risk that the cost of urgently needed backlog maintenance increases, and also challenges the ability of colleges across Scotland to invest in new digital infrastructure to generate efficiencies and enhance learning experiences for students, at a time when the demands on digital infrastructure and connectivity are greater than ever before.

Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity

As a result of COVID-19 and the move to blended learning for college learners there has been a significantly increased emphasis on, and need for, digital infrastructure and connectivity in the college sector. On that basis there is a need for further sustained investment in the college sector's digital infrastructure.

Such investment will be crucial to support the work of colleges in meeting targets established by the Scottish Government in order to increase the number of learners accessing courses from SIMD10 and SIMD20 postcodes. Further support of this nature will build on the increased investment already made to mitigate the impact of digital poverty and ensure that colleges can provide those learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds with the digital infrastructure and connectivity required to support their learning, and improve their life chances.

Typically, the college sector has employed both capital and revenue funding for the maintenance and improvement of buildings and estates, however it is becoming increasingly important for investing in and developing cohesive and sustainable digital infrastructure.

The college sector has over the last twelve months developed a [Digital Ambition](#) which incorporates a whole system approach to digital to ensure the sector has a clear strategic direction in developing, promoting and maximising its network infrastructure, systems and data, and to ensure the sector's capacity to deliver is both sustainable and resilient. This will enable colleges across Scotland to lead and contribute to strategic partnerships and collaborations to benefit businesses and communities whilst also enhancing opportunities and potential for inclusive economic growth for the country.

As a sector, Scotland's colleges have moved with unprecedented speed from a primarily face to face pedagogy to online delivery during the lockdown of the nation, and have upgrading their digital capacity to counter the impact of Digital Poverty and the Digital Divide, through the provision of laptops, tablets and internet access tools.

In light of this fluid situation, the sector completed a Digital Survey of the sector. This indicated that in the present operating context a number of colleges will find it challenging to fund and deploy resources to meet the needs of students, thereby negatively impacting on their ability to engage in training. The network capacities across colleges were also found to differ quite significantly, with

concerns expressed around the capacity of existing networks to cope with demand if a blended learning model was to be run in 2020/21 and in future years as a greater reliance on online learning has emerged.

Common Investment Approach

Colleges are anchor institutions, serving communities and areas of significant multiple deprivation; they have tremendous value as existing assets for the public good. It is imperative that the Scottish Government maximises their community potential and invests in supporting initiatives that increase college and community usage.

With this operating context in mind, we wish to make some suggestions around the proposed common investment hierarchy, and the steps that are laid out in the Draft Infrastructure Investment Plan as it currently stands.

We agree that the steps proposed in the common investment hierarchy are the right ones, but we feel there are some adjustments, informed by the experiences of the college sector, that could be introduced to enhance the hierarchy as currently presented. These are as follows:

1. *Determine future need – Consider appropriate infrastructure provision in light of changes in service design, availability of digital platforms and technological innovation, and resilience in light of population and climate change forecasts.*

We would advise that this step should be adjusted so that when it comes to determining future need this also considers the real time data on capital need and the latest information available regarding the capital context for individual sectors. For example, the college sector currently has a £360m backlog maintenance to be resolved, with four campuses in urgent need of replacement, at a further indicative estimated cost of £70-100 million per campus.

2. *Maximise use of existing assets – Maximise use and the safe operation of existing assets to meet future need.*

The 26 colleges across Scotland, in 13 regions, are spread throughout the mainland and islands, with the colleges having multiple campuses and numerous outreach centres.

As has been stated in the [Cumberford-Little Report](#), colleges are ‘anchor institutions’ that really are at the heart of the communities they serve, and it will be through the continued efforts of staff, students and stakeholders from every college community around Scotland that the necessary support, opportunities and end results will come. Despite the uncertainty created by COVID-19 there remains a social contract between colleges and the communities they serve, as well as a shared vision of the positive outcomes that can be delivered through community partnership.

In this role as anchor institutions serving communities and areas of significant multiple deprivation, colleges have tremendous value as existing assets for the public good, and on that basis we would strongly suggest that maximising their usage, and meeting future capital needs across the sector, will play a significant role in helping to meet future need, especially in the recovery from COVID-19.

3. *Repurpose & Co-locate – Reconfigure or repurpose existing assets, giving preference to co-location or shared facilities where appropriate*

The asset base of the colleges forms a unique framework of accessible buildings within the regional communities. These buildings present a positive and well-known location for people to attend, and there is the potential for a wider scope for the use of these buildings for a range of other public services that both students and the wider community could access.

Young people may need to access a wide range of public services and co-locating them within a college campus makes sense on likely take up rates, coverage and ease of contact. It also allows

more sensitive or confidential services to be offered at a neutral location, raising the likelihood of a successful impact.

As such, we would suggest that this element of the Common Investment Approach could be enhanced by including more explicit requirements on local stakeholders to engage, consult, collaborate on repurposing and co-location, to both maximise the use of community assets and the impact of the public pound in delivering for communities.

4. Replace or New Build – Consider suitability and sustainability of new build assets to meet future need

Whilst individual circumstances (including possible constraints on use of buildings due to ownership or covenants etc.) would need to be explored, there is nonetheless the potential for college buildings to be used for co-locating other services offered by a wide range of public bodies to members of a community, but also as a base for offices and meeting facilities to aid public services.

On that basis, we would advise that investment in replacing and/or building new college sector infrastructure offers to opportunity to meet future needs of communities in a suitable and sustainable fashion. As part of this, we would question whether in considering the suitability and sustainability of new build assets whether there should be a mandatory requirement regarding engagement with partners, such as local authorities and universities, around developing joined up investment propositions, avoiding duplication in infrastructure investment in doing so.

Dashboard of Indicators

We would agree that a dashboard of indicators is a sensible approach to enable informed decisions to be taken about the long-term trade-offs and choices in our infrastructure investments. However, we would advise that as it is currently presented it does not capture education, which we know has a vital role to play in supporting both sustainable places and inclusive growth.

We note that the dashboard and the indicators within it are drawn from the National Performance Framework. On that basis, our ask would be that the dashboard incorporates those indicators from Education, such as Educational Attainment.

On the basis of the information we have provided above with regards to the current context that the college sector is currently operating, we would question whether the dashboard of indicators could also be employed in decision-making about short-term trade-offs about infrastructure investments.

We make this point as a number of colleges are having to respond to the accelerated challenges around Digital infrastructure and have had to re-allocate existing capital funding in order to support this activity and ensure that learners are able to maintain and complete their studies on a remote basis and progress into the workforce and/or further study.

Role of College Sector in Supporting Draft Infrastructure Investment Plan

The college sector has a vital role to play in supporting the Scottish Government's Infrastructure Investment Plan. In each of the three themes (enabling net zero emissions and environmental sustainability; driving inclusive economic growth; and building resilient and sustainable places) the college sector is a leading partner in delivery and in enabling future sustainable successes. In addition will help significantly to address inequality, including for protected characteristic groups, and socioeconomic disadvantage.

As such, we present the following overview of how the sector can support these themes. The college sector must be included in developing a common assessment framework for prioritising

infrastructure investment. The framework would need to be developed in partnership with the SFC and the Scottish Government, and we would look to outline these in further discussions with both.

Enabling Net Zero Emissions and Environmental Sustainability

The college sector has a vital role to play in supporting both the development and delivery of low and zero-carbon infrastructure in Scotland, as across the sector our members are large users of infrastructure, in terms of the college learning estate and the wider digital infrastructure underpinning wider learning on digital and virtual platforms.

Colleges are contributing to tackling the climate emergency and delivering for a green economy and are a key sector to ensure the Scottish Government goals of Net Zero emissions and environmental sustainability are delivered, both in terms of their own estates and by delivering initiatives to address the climate emergency, for example:

- The carbon footprint of the college sector has reduced by 18% in the last two years
- Development of cleaner transport initiatives
- Training of the existing workforce, students and apprentices in renewable energy and energy transition
- Tackling gender imbalance within the energy sector, e.g. Girls into Energy Programmes
- Partnership working in relation to hydrogen-based infrastructures.

There is a real opportunity for the sector, in contributing to the upscaling of this infrastructure, to play a greater role in helping Scotland achieve its climate change targets.

Of equal importance, colleges are a key delivery partner for the workforce who construct and maintain infrastructure across Scotland, delivering high-quality technical education courses to provide workers with the skills that are required for them to hold successful careers in low and zero-carbon infrastructure related roles.

There is real opportunity for the college sector here to upskill and reskill this workforce, including those who lose their jobs as a result of COVID-19, to ensure that the wider Scottish infrastructure network is futureproofed to support a low carbon economy, whilst also supporting the key Commission aim of making all possible efforts to create decent, fair and high value work, in a way which does not negatively affect the current workforce and overall economy.

The college sector has an important role to play in supporting inclusive growth and the development of a low carbon economy, and colleges are currently heavily involved in both areas, through actively developing projects in collaboration with the Energy Skills Partnership. Therefore, it is important that colleges are a key component of conversations as the commission develops its work going forward.

Driving Inclusive Economic Growth

As an agile, collaborative, and inclusive national asset, colleges will play a critical part in driving Scotland's economic, social and educational recovery by:

- playing a vital role in rebuilding better
- supporting the requirements of the changed economy that will emerge
- improving employability of our citizens
- supporting businesses, large and small, to rebuild and re-engage their workforce and to increase their economy of scale, as part of a regional approach
- supporting social cohesion, positive and resilient mental health and wellbeing of our communities
- seeking an inclusive and green recovery
- contributing to the Four Capitals: economic, social, human, and natural
- supporting delivery of the National Performance Framework.

Building Resilient and Sustainable Places

In addition to fulfilling their roles in providing individuals with opportunities, colleges will also continue to act as civic anchors, building resilient and sustainable places.

Colleges have a significant track record in helping to bind communities together by providing local hubs for people to meet and access services, and offering campus amenities such as digital access, sports facilities, hair salons, beauty services, and restaurants that are affordable for the people within the local area, addressing the mental health and wellbeing of our communities in doing so, whilst supporting other related positive improvements in areas around productivity, community wealth, social cohesion and community resilience.

It is this track record that gives us confidence that colleges will support the theme around building resilient and sustainable places; and help address inequality, including for protected characteristic groups and socioeconomic disadvantage.

Emissions Targets

We support the planned approach to developing a new approach to assessing the contribution made by infrastructure investment to Scotland's emissions targets.

Conclusion

As the Scottish Government receives views to inform the implementation of the Commission's recommendations from the Phase One report, in order to help deliver and implement the right future infrastructure priorities for an inclusive, net zero emissions economy in Scotland, we would hope that the knowledge and expertise of the college sector, a sector which uses, plans, manages, maintains, finances and delivers both physical and digital infrastructure across Scotland, is taken into consideration.

We would welcome the opportunity to share this practical experience with the Scottish Government in greater detail.

At this stage, our specific requests would be:

- An assurance that the Infrastructure Investment Plan is responsive to local and regional needs and allows for partnership working that can meet those needs, including bringing in colleges and building on existing economic-education partnerships.
- Recognition that if the college sector received a proportionate share of future infrastructure investment to cover both backlog maintenance and new capital developments, this would support the Common Investment Approach as outlined in the Infrastructure Investment Plan.

Colleges Scotland
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