

Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee – Call for Views on Climate Change Plan – Colleges Scotland and ESP Response – September 2025

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. As the membership body, Colleges Scotland represents all 24 colleges, which deliver both further education and 20% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

Energy Skills Partnership (ESP), the college sector agency for energy transition, zero carbon transport, engineering, construction and STEM, acts as a key strategic body in increasing Scotland's capability and capacity to deliver the right skills to respond to industry demand against emerging skills priorities stemming from the Climate Emergency, Just Transition and move to net zero, supporting the delivery of the [Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan 2020-2025](#).

Colleges are uniquely positioned to support the delivery of Scotland's Climate Change Plan, which sets out the pathway to net zero by 2045. By equipping learners with the skills required for a low-carbon economy and enabling a Just Transition for communities across Scotland, colleges play a vital role in achieving national climate goals. This runs parallel to their own activity at an institutional level in working towards delivery of net zero emissions and driving wider societal change in support of the net zero agenda.

On behalf of the college sector in Scotland we welcome the opportunity to provide our views regarding the Scottish Parliament's Call for Views on the future Climate Change Plan.

Key Points

The draft Climate Change Plan outlines how the Scottish Government intends to meet emissions reduction targets across all portfolio areas and sectors of the economy. In order for the college sector to maximise its role and support the meeting of these targets, the following key criteria need to be delivered.

College Sector Climate Change and Net Zero Actions and Requirements

Colleges as public sector bodies are required to meet zero emissions heating requirements by 2038 as part of the wider Scottish Government commitment to decarbonise the public sector estate. Subsequently, Scotland's colleges have developed a strong and coordinated commitment to achieving net zero carbon emissions, with a target date of 2040, ahead of the Scottish Government's national goal of 2045.

In order to deliver this, as outlined in the [Scottish Colleges' Statement of Commitment on the Climate Emergency \(2021\)](#), co-ordinated and co-produced by College Development Network, ESP and Colleges Scotland, colleges are progressing the following actions:

1. Supporting Scotland's efforts to achieve net zero climate emissions by 2045 or earlier if possible, with Scotland's colleges aiming to achieve net zero by 2040 or earlier
2. Embedding environmental sustainability in institutional strategies and set measurable targets

3. Addressing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals in institutional strategies
4. Sharing best practice within and beyond the college/university sector
5. Deploying of expertise and experience to combat climate change
6. Contributing to public debate on climate change and use the power of our example to encourage others
7. Working with Scottish industry, employers, public sector bodies and others to improve working practices and find practical solutions to climate change and to make our planet safe for future generations
8. Encouraging, where appropriate, colleges to adopt the UK HE/FE Climate Commission's 'Climate Action Roadmap for FE Colleges'
9. Each college publishing action plans to address on-campus and supply chain emissions, setting out what steps they will take over a five-year horizon and beyond where possible, and what they aim to achieve to address the climate emergency
10. Educating staff, students, employers and communities on the impact their daily lives and working practices have on the environment/climate. While working with our partners, local employers and communities to ensure everyone is aware of their personal responsibility to our planet.

In delivering these actions, colleges are working to embed sustainability across all taught areas, including curriculum development and professional upskilling, with institutional action plans required to cover emissions from buildings, supply chains, and transport, with a five-year horizon and beyond. These carbon reduction journeys have included the following activity:

- Integration of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals into institutional delivery of education, research and operations, with proactive moves being made across the sector in relation to carbon emissions and energy, waste management, sustainable transport and sustainable procurement.
- Sustained success at the Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges (EAUC) Green Gown Awards which recognise exceptional sustainability initiatives being undertaken within the sectors, with Edinburgh College and Dundee and Angus College receiving Benefiting Society and Staff Sustainability Champion Awards respectively at the 2024 awards.
- Borders College securing global achievement as a winner at the 2023 International Green Gown Awards in the Climate Action Category, based on their sustainability journey to date which has focused on reducing emissions by implementing Co2 reduction measures including Solar PV, building an ECO House and installing Wastewater Heating System.

Whilst the sector intention is clear, the route towards fully delivering on this intention in practice is less so. In the current context, colleges are unlikely to achieve the public sector net zero goals because there is no current funding mechanism for institutions to invest in their estates to reduce their carbon footprint.

Whilst the sector is currently working with the Scottish Funding Council in relation to the [College Infrastructure Strategy](#) and a subsequent Infrastructure Investment Plan, in the absence of investment there will be a limit to the scope and scale of carbon reduction activity that the sector is able to undertake.

As advised within the College Infrastructure Strategy "There is an urgent need to explore new and existing funding for the wide range of capital projects requiring investment. The scale, breadth and pace of investment need will require deployment of public and private funding solutions", with the SFC committing to work with colleges, the Scottish Government and the SFT to identify funding solutions for this type and scale of projects.

Clarity of College Role in Supporting Delivery of UK Government and Scottish Government Policy Ambitions

There is a need for more consistency and clarity regarding the role of the college sector in supporting the Just Transition and Clean Energy agendas, including with regards to the Climate

Change Plan, to reflect the wider balance that needs to be struck between the current oil and gas sector and the growing renewables sector. The sustained and necessary move away from oil and gas needs to be tempered with the reality that there will be a need for those resources for decades to come. Skills Development Scotland has evidenced a further £24bn of investment in Oil and Gas is expected across the next decade.

This provides an opportunity, through the Draft Climate Change being considered, to deliver more targeted and effective messaging about what colleges do, and especially their crucial role in reaching climate and Net Zero targets, alongside their track record of servicing existing industries.

To provide this clarity of purpose and underline the critical college role to the wider public and economy, we would recommend that the Scottish Government, in order to ensure effective delivery of the Climate Change Plan, further consider how development of the required workforce can be driven through the expanded provision of industry intensive, vocational education and technical skills through the college sector. This should be complemented by a focus on working with the key identified sectors and the college sector to develop and deliver expanded and more dynamic apprenticeship pathways, other work-based learning pathways and agile fast paced upskilling opportunities for workers, including rapid retraining for redundant workers to get them back into work at the earliest opportunity.

Role of College Education For Talent Attraction and Retention

Young people need to be given confidence that a career in renewables or part of the Just Transition is a viable and attractive option. To help with this the college sector would recommend that the Scottish Government considers how engagement for school learners in college can be enhanced, building on existing school college partnerships, so that they are given a better understanding of the career opportunities that colleges provide in relation to the energy sector. School teachers are major influencers of their pupils, and if they are equipped with a better understanding of what colleges have to offer then they can help guide their students to make more informed choices.

For those who are established members of the industrial and business workforce there is a need for policy drivers to be focused on upskilling and reskilling, and the opportunities that are available to them through Scotland's colleges. Just as above with regards to school pupils, the current workforce needs to be given the confidence that retraining will reap substantial future rewards, and this assurance can be provided by the Scottish Governments communicating these benefits.

For both school learners and existing members of the workforce the role of college education in supporting their learning journeys into the energy sector needs to be made clear through the Energy Skills Passport, which provides a valuable platform to support individuals in identify routes into roles in the energy sector and the training and course options available to them. The college sector in Scotland welcomes the approach embodied through the Energy Skills Passport and would be open to further engagement on this to ensure the full college sector curriculum offer is mapped and reflected in this initiative as part of the broader delivery actions to realise the ambitions outlined within the Climate Change Plan in practice.

Sustainable Funding

For colleges to be in a stronger position to contribute towards meeting net zero targets, and to make the required investment in their facilities and teaching equipment in order to deliver the skills required to achieve Net Zero, they will need to be sustainably funded. Doing so, and removing some of the barriers to further progress would go a long way to enabling delivery of net zero by 2040.

The SFC's report, [Financial Sustainability of Colleges in Scotland 2020-21 to 2025-26](#), recognises the worsening financial health of Scottish colleges. Unless there is significant and sustained multi-year investment in the sector, the current position is unlikely to change, to the detriment of

delivering both UK and Scottish Government policy ambitions on climate change and clean, renewable energy generation.

[Audit Scotland](#) has also evidenced that the college sector has seen a 17% reduction in real-terms funding in the three years between 2021/22 to 2024/25, that has resulted in colleges now having to deliver significant annual recurrent savings that will have a material impact on learners and their ability to support those key sectors as included in the most recent version of the Climate Change Plan.

Scotland's capacity to respond to the Climate Emergency will be negatively impacted without an adequately resourced college sector that is sufficiently funded on a multi-year basis. Having the ability to invest more than just one year in advance for the college sector instils confidence to industry and business, and in the long term will support the development of the appropriately skilled workforce that is required to meet the current and future industry needs.

The college sector has received pockets of funding to support work around the Net Zero transition, including £3m committed by the Scottish Government to an Offshore Wind Skills Programme in January 2025, alongside resource through the Just Transition Fund. However, this funding has to be more systemic and sustained to fully enable the college sector to maximise its delivery role in supporting industry and the renewables sectors. This is set against the backdrop of £230bn of generational investment in Scotland's infrastructure and economy, including £56bn in energy and utilities, £25bn in Scotwind and £15bn in construction, as evidenced by Skills Development Scotland.

In the absence of systemic and sustained funding there is a real risk that these considerable opportunities for Scotland's economy and education and skills system, including colleges, will be missed to the detriment of learners, businesses and local and regional economies. The result of this will be a lack of tangible action on the Net Zero targets and climate ambitions embodied within the Climate Change Plan.

Targeted Funding

Creating the conditions for success also requires greater flexibility of funding to enable a wider balance of course provision supporting net zero related upskilling and reskilling delivered through the college sector. The Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF) as delivered in Scotland through the college sector enabled employers to address priority skills and skills gaps in their organisation by accessing funding to create training programmes that meet their needs.

However, following the Draft Budget announcement in December 2023, it was confirmed by the Scottish Government that the FWDF was to be discontinued, in spite of the findings of the [Scottish Government commissioned evaluation](#) which evidenced the successful role of colleges in delivering the FWDF.

The loss of the FWDF was detrimental to the college sector. The FWDF enhanced the way colleges engaged with their business communities on a local and regional level, by strengthening links to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and providing larger businesses with training development opportunities to support inclusive economic growth.

The National Transition Training Fund (NTTF) was also effective in this way. Introduced in October 2020, the NTTF sought to tackle the anticipated rise in unemployment through Covid-19 in adults aged 25+ by offering short sharp training opportunities for people to learn in-demand skills. It provided adults with tailored support to identify relevant training and employment opportunities, followed by funded training to match each individual's needs. Just under 20,000 learners engaged with opportunities delivered through the Fund.

Building on the FWDF and NTTF, a targeted fund delivered as part of the core financial settlement for the college sector, to bring together colleges and industry, would make a significant impact in

creating further capacity for colleges to support the development and delivery of the workforce that is needed now to deliver the Clean Energy and Net Zero agenda in practice.

Role of Modern Apprenticeships

Levels of funding in place for the delivery of Modern Apprenticeships has remained static with the Scottish Government having confirmed funding for 25,500 Modern Apprentices for 2025/26, as has been the case for the past decade. However, the evidence from Skills Development Scotland around economic opportunities for Scotland indicates the critical need for skilled workers in fields including Energy Distribution and Transmission, Electrical and Mechanical Engineering, and Offshore Energy, and therefore a significant increase in the number of Modern Apprenticeships will be required.

Currently, Scotland's Modern Apprenticeship (MA) system sees demand outstrip current funding, with employer requests for 34,000 starts in 2024/25 compared to the 25,500 funded places supported by the Scottish Government's £102.5 million investment.

As part of the ongoing discussions being progressed in relation to the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill through the Education, Children and Young People Committee, there needs to be a focus on how the funding model for Apprenticeships can encourage growth in further Modern Apprenticeships delivery through the college sector so as to address the requirements of industry and the Scottish economy.

Colleges Scotland / ESP
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