

Annual Report

1 August 2025 – 31 July 2026



Introduction

This is my second annual report as Chief Executive Officer of Colleges Scotland, and as I reflect on 2025/26, I am struck by what has been an exceptionally busy, productive and exciting year for the college sector. Despite the challenges that continue to face colleges, we have collectively made significant progress in advocating for our sector and have strengthened our position as a vital part of Scotland's skills system as well as valuable social and economic assets to our country.



Throughout the year, Colleges Scotland has remained unwavering in its commitment to championing the sector. We have continued to advocate for increased and sustainable investment in colleges, highlighting their crucial role as anchor institutions within local communities and as key drivers of skills development, economic growth and social mobility across Scotland.

One of our most notable achievements was securing significant additional investment for the college sector through the Scottish Government's 2026/27 Budget. This included funding that will help colleges continue their important work in supporting learners and tackling poverty in communities throughout the country.

Collaboration has been central to our success. Working closely with members and key stakeholders, we have helped bring important initiatives to fruition, including the Care Skills Partnership, and are continuing to progress the Defence Technical Excellence Colleges (DTEC) programme with the UK and Scottish governments. Our members have also played a pivotal role in shaping a range of influential reports and reviews that will support our ambitions for meaningful structural reform and a stronger future for the sector.

The Scottish Election in May 2026 provided a valuable opportunity to raise the profile of colleges and their contribution to Scotland's future. Through our election engagement and advocacy, including a well-attended hustings event involving all major political parties, we worked hard to ensure colleges featured prominently in all party manifesto commitments. Since the election, we have continued to build relationships with newly elected Cabinet Secretaries, Ministers and MSPs to maintain momentum and strengthen support for the sector.

College Employers Scotland has also seen a year of positive progress. Following the appointment of a new Director and Head of National Bargaining, significant strides have been made in strengthening industrial relations. This has included the successful revision of the National Recognition and Procedures Agreement, alongside the negotiation of multi-year pay agreements for both Lecturing and Professional Services staff.

Within our own organisation, staffing has remained stable and the new Colleges Scotland governance model is now fully embedded. The Board of Trustees is firmly established, and the committee structure is operating effectively, providing strong leadership and oversight as we continue to evolve.

Looking ahead to the new academic year and parliamentary term, our focus remains clear. We will continue to strongly advocate for the sustainable investment and policy support that colleges need to thrive in both the Programme for Government and the 2027/28 Scottish Government Budget. Working closely with our members, the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and our wider network of stakeholders I am particularly excited about advancing the College Sector of the Future workstream, which will help shape a modern, sustainable and responsive college sector that meets the aspirations of future learners, communities and the Scottish economy.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all our members. Your continued support, expertise and commitment are invaluable to the successful work of Colleges Scotland. Together, we have achieved a great deal over the past year, and I look forward to working with you as we continue to build an even stronger future for Scotland's colleges.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Donoghue', is positioned above the name and title.

Gavin Donoghue
Chief Executive Officer



Key Achievements

- **£70m increase in core investment in the college sector** – Announced as part of the Scottish Government's 2026/27 Budget.
- **£10m for a Flexible Workforce Development Fund** – Focused on families at risk of poverty to help more parents access the skills they need while promoting workplace practices that reduce barriers for parents.
- **£9m for a Raising Income through Skills and Education (RISE) Fund** – To give parents and carers practical help to build new skills – offering training they can fit around family life, along with essential support with childcare, travel, and study costs.
- **£2m for a Training Access Fund** – To provide training opportunities for people in low paid work and to strengthen adult upskilling and reskilling.
- **£10m for Defence Technical Excellence Colleges** – As part of a Defence Growth Deal for Scotland.
- **Influencing the development of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill** – Ensuring this was informed by the view of the college sector and securing amendments regarding the delivery of Modern Apprenticeships.
- **Establishment of the College Sector of the Future workstream**, With the aim to collectively bring together evidence, research and ideas that will shape a long-term vision for Scotland's colleges, ensuring they remain at the heart of delivering opportunity, prosperity and inclusive economic growth for decades to come.
- **Reform of national collective bargaining** – Worked successfully with trade union partners to strengthen industrial relations by revising the National Recognition and Procedures Agreement, with the reform taking effect on 1 March 2026.
- **Three-year Lecturer Pay Agreement** – Ratified in July 2026, delivering a consolidated pay rise of 3.75% in AY 2026/27, 3.25% in 2027/28 and 3.2% in 2028/29.
- **Three-year Professional Services Staff Pay Agreement** – Ratified in December 2025, delivering a consolidated pay rise of 4.25% in AY 2025/26, 3.4% in 2026/27 and 3% in 2027/28.

Policy Activity

Throughout 2025/26, Colleges Scotland continued to advocate strongly on behalf of the college sector, calling for sustainable funding, appropriate flexibilities, and supportive policies to enable effective delivery for learners and to help return colleges to a position of stability in an extremely challenging financial context, including looking towards the future with the College Sector of the Future workstream. This advocacy included sustained engagement with the Scottish Government and the SFC through the Tripartite Alignment Group, contributing to a **10% increase in investment** to support delivery of key government priorities, including the RISE Fund and the introduction of a new Flexible Workforce Development Fund.

Colleges Scotland also continued to be a strong advocate for the college sector, championing its vital role in delivering the Scottish Government's **Education Reform Agenda**. We work closely with partners and key stakeholders to ensure colleges can continue to equip learners of all ages with the skills needed to thrive in a changing economy, support Scotland's Just Transition, and drive sustainable economic prosperity.

Other significant areas of policy work included:

- Significant interaction and work related to initiate and establish the remit, structure and governance around the **College Sector of the Future** workstream, through engagement with the sector and external stakeholders.
- Sustained engagement with Scottish Government and SFC on the development of the **RISE, Training Access Fund, and Flexible Workforce Development Fund**, convening a Programme Steering Group through which to develop funding methodology and guidance for institutions.
- **Established the Care Skills Partnership Initiative** following agreement of the proposal by Scottish Government and SFC, with Edinburgh College acting as the host institution, and having a dedicated Project Manager to develop and oversee activity.
- Working in partnership with Energy Skills Partnership to ensure the successful delivery of the college sector **Offshore Wind Skills Programme**, alongside developing and submitting a further proposal to Scottish Government for continued investment beyond AY 2025/26.
- Ongoing engagement with the SFC on the development of the **College Infrastructure Investment Plan**, hosting a Stage Two Launch Event in October 2025 and supporting college engagement in the refreshed Baseline 2026 exercise which will inform the final Investment Plan due for publication in Autumn 2026.



- Engagement with **Audit Scotland** to inform the development of their annual *Scotland's Colleges* Report and key messages within, alongside engagement on their report assessing [Post-School Education and Skills Reform](#) as led by Scottish Government.
- Continued dialogue with Scottish Government and SFC on the delivery of **Modern Apprenticeships** including engagement with colleges on current costs of delivery to ensure the future sustainability of these programmes and participating in the Contribution Rates Review. This is in addition to separate discussions with the Scottish Government on Graduate Apprenticeship and positioning the sector to have a greater role in future delivery.
- Working with the Scottish Government and other stakeholders on the **Foundation Apprenticeship Enhancement Group (FAEG)** to assist in ensuring that any ongoing reform work delivers necessary policy changes for the college sector, and enables the future sustainable delivery of these qualifications by colleges across Scotland.
- Facilitated sector engagement on **Skills Needs Assessments**, working with Skills Development Scotland (SDS) to host sector workshops enabling college perspectives to feed into the development of this new product, alongside engagement with Scottish Government on the progress of National Skills Planning approaches.
- Launching the **Creating Safer Colleges toolkit** in collaboration with CDN to strengthen college responses to gender-based violence (GBV) and harassment.
- Partnership working with Universities Scotland to develop **Principles for Pathways for Supporting Students Access to Mental Health Supports and Services**, securing agreement for this approach from the Student Mental Health Action Plan Delivery Group.
- Continuing to work closely with Universities Scotland through the co-convened **Joint Articulation Group**, to progress work around the Articulation agenda, including the agreement of a new definition of Articulation and liaising with SDS and the sector on expansion of the pathways website to all colleges and universities across Scotland.
- Holding a college sector workshop with Scottish Government, SFC and Interface to support **College Innovation Activity**, with a report being developed for submission into Scottish Government containing key policy-level actions to enable more development of college-led innovation.



- Submitting sector responses to a number of **consultations and inquiries** including the Climate Change Plan, Support for Part-time Study and Disabled Students, and the Report on Widening Access.
- Participating in the **Tertiary Quality Steering Group** to contribute towards shaping the new Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) which is changing how quality and assurance is conducted and assessed in Scotland's colleges, to help deliver the best learning experience for learners.
- Commencing new round of engagement with Scottish Government and SFC to secure a continued **Insurance Derogation** for the college sector, working with the sector to develop a business case for a long-term solution.
- Working with the British Council and CDN to establish the **Colleges International Working Group** to highlight international opportunities and share best practice across the college sector.
- Working closely with Scottish Government officials in the ongoing implementation of the **International Education Strategy** (IES) through meetings of the ministerial **IES Governance Group**.
- Working with Scottish Government officials to help oversee the **Scottish Education Exchange Programme (SEEP)**. This included the delivery of funding to 12 colleges to take forward 15 projects relating to international partnership activity and knowledge exchange.
- Reassociation with Erasmus+ has meant engaging with the sector to get them prepared for writing bids and applications – assisting colleges with their **Erasmus+ Higher Education Charter (ECHE)** applications. As well as working with the British Council to set up webinars and information sessions for the sector.
- Ongoing engagement with sportscotland and Scottish Student Sport to maintain the **Active Campus Network** across the college sector, strengthening the existing network of sport and physical activity staff, and developing a sustainable delivery model for beyond AY 2026/27.
- Supporting Scottish Government officials with the roll-out of the **national Meningococcal B (MenB) vaccination campaign**.
- Working with WorldSkills UK to continue **supporting WorldSkills in Scotland** and the participation of Scotland's colleges in national and international competitions, alongside supporting a Stakeholder Engagement Event in March 2026.



Policy Communications and Public Affairs Activity

Political engagement remained strong throughout 2025/26, with Colleges Scotland arranging and participating in 36 key meetings involving MPs, MSPs, and government Ministers. This included engagement with new Ministers and MSPs following the Scottish Election in May 2026.

Prior to the Scottish Parliament election in May 2026, we launched the Colleges Scotland **Manifesto** and hosted a well-attended **hustings event** with all the main political parties at Edinburgh College, which revealed clear political consensus on the vital role of colleges.

We also held a successful **Fringe Event** at the Scottish Labour Party Policy Conference, with Chris Murray MP and Angela Cox, which focused on how colleges can unlock opportunities for learners, employers and communities. In addition, we attended the Scottish Liberal Democrats Business Day, the Scottish Conservative Party Conference, and the Reform Scotland Party Conference.

Westminster engagement has continued with evidence given to the UK Scottish Affairs Committee on Defence Skills in March 2026 and to the UK All-Party Group for FE and Lifelong Learning on Adult Education in June 2026.

We participated in, and co-ordinated sector speakers for, five parliamentary **Cross-Party Groups** in 2025/26. We also provided secretariat support to the Cross-Party Group on Skills and worked with Universities Scotland to support the Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities.

We worked with think tank Enlighten to hold an **online discussion** about the future of Scotland's colleges in the face of rising demand for technical and vocational education, the pressing need for skilled workers to join the labour market, and new ways of learning spreading globally in January 2026.

Published **A Vision for the Delivery of Skills, Vocational and Technical Education in Scotland** report by Professor Joe Little, a specialist in future signals for businesses and education and Digital Entrepreneur in Residence at the University of Stirling, on the global influences likely to alter future vocational education and training at colleges.



A Vision for the Delivery of Skills, Vocational and Technical Education in Scotland



Professor Joe Little
July 2025

Colleges Scotland held a **conference for chairs and principals** in June 2026 at Fife College, featuring a keynote address from the Minister and two engaging panel discussions – one on the UK tertiary landscape and the other on employers and skills. The event concluded with a dinner, where the Fife College Student President delivered an inspiring speech.



We supported WorldSkills UK with the organisation of a **Scottish Homecoming reception** in March 2026 which celebrated Scotland's competitors who took part in the National Finals and recognised their outstanding achievements.

Colleges Scotland contributed its expertise as a member of the **judging panel** for the Green Gown Awards, supporting the recognition of sustainability excellence across the education sector.

The annual **Keyfacts** booklet was published in June 2026.

Media activity increased with 60 media releases, statements, blogs, and interviews with journalists, and we continued to provide members with regular communications on a range of key policy issues including investment and funding, the Scottish Budget, the Tertiary Education and Training Act, and student poverty.

In addition, we published a short **blog series** to celebrate National Innovation Week and published a number of student case studies for Scottish Apprenticeship Week.

We continued to work with CDN and the Marketing Network, including contributing to Scotland's **FIFA World Cup Pass the Ball** national marketing campaign.



Colleges Scotland's website traffic saw a notable rise, averaging 2,906 users per month – a 28% increase compared to the previous year. **Engagement on LinkedIn** also grew significantly, with posts receiving an average of 12,900 impressions per month, up from 7,393 the year before.

We also maintained our commitment to timely communication by continuing to issue Daily Monitoring Reports, weekly Friday emails, and monthly 'Lines to Take' briefings to members.



"Colleges Scotland has worked tirelessly across a wide range of policy areas, securing additional funding for the sector and leading important initiatives like the Health and Social Care Partnership, RISE fund and development of the Defence Technical Excellence College approach. In addition, the successful start of the College Sector of the Future workstream has been key for future sustainability. While financial pressures continue to be significant, colleges remain committed to transforming lives, supporting communities, and contributing to Scotland's economic future. I'm proud of what we have achieved together and grateful to have worked with colleagues across the sector to help shape and deliver our collective ambitions."

– Andy Witty, Director of Strategic Policy and Corporate Governance

College Employers Scotland Activity

As the national employers' association, our core priority is to support colleges through constructive national collective bargaining, workforce planning, and the implementation of robust sector-wide policies. Over the past year – bolstered by the appointment of a **new Director and Head of National Bargaining** – we prioritised balancing institutional sustainability with fair work principles, ensuring colleges are empowered to deliver high-quality education and economic value.

The 2025/26 period was notable for a positive shift in employer-trade union relations, underpinned by the successful development of a **revised National Recognition and Procedures Agreement (NRPA)**. The reformed agreement commits negotiating parties to the Nine Principles of Public Life in Scotland, helping to minimise disputes and safeguard learning continuity. Structural reforms include removal of the Central Committee and creation of separate, independent committees for lecturing and professional services staff to improve negotiation effectiveness. The revised NRPA has contributed to increased stability and progress in a range of policy and activity areas, notably staff pay.

Reflecting a positive shift in college sector industrial relations, a **new three-year pay agreement for lecturers** was ratified at the end of AY 2025/26. This will deliver a consolidated pay rise of more than 10%: 3.75% in AY 2026/27, 3.25% in 2027/28 and 3% in 2028/29. In addition, CES, Colleges Scotland and recognised trade unions have committed to work together to seek government funding for a Distant Islands Allowance that would reflect higher living costs in island communities.

Constructive negotiations with trade unions also resulted in a **three-year pay agreement for professional services staff**, delivering a 4.25% pay increase in AY 2025/26, followed by 3.4% in 2026/27 and 3% in 2027/28. Additional Scottish Government funding supports the first two years of the deal, which also guarantees a minimum payment of £1,150 in 2025/26 for staff earning £27,000 (FTE) or less. Other enhancements include a lower overtime threshold and higher standby allowances.

Other achievements include:

- The launch of a new National **Grievance Policy and Model Procedure for lecturing staff**. These will help to ensure concerns in the workplace are addressed and investigated promptly, fairly and thoroughly.
- A new **Workforce Planning Agreement for lecturing staff**, with CES and the EIS-FELA agreeing to use the full scope of the NRPA to consult on national policies and negotiate any resulting workforce planning.
- Continued progress in **boosting lecturing staff registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland**. The number of college lecturers without full or provisional conditional registration fell by 555 (20.9%) between 31 March 2025 and 31 March 2026.
- Continued progress on **Job Evaluation for professional services staff**. AY 2025/26 advanced key milestones such as creating a Project Board and the completion of a sector-wide survey which saw every college provide data on the number of roles requiring evaluation. This groundwork positions CES and its partners to move forward with Job Evaluation once the SFC completes its Lessons Learned Review of the project.
- Agreement on a total allocation of **780 hours of National Facilities Time for the professional services staff unions** (UNISON, Unite and GMB) over AY 2025/26. This marks a large reduction from the previous annual total of 9,100 hours and generates a significant cost saving for the sector.

- Good progress towards agreeing a National **Grievance Policy and Model Procedure for professional services staff**.
- Proactive steps to deepen understanding of **workforce needs across the sector** and how they might evolve. This includes preparation to undertake a research project whose findings will support the College Sector of the Future workstream.

CES Communications and Public Affairs Activity

The positive shift in industrial relations across the college sector throughout 2025/26 provided good conditions for a robust programme of media and public affairs activity.

CES issued 16 **news releases, specialist articles and other external updates** during this period. Several of these generated in-depth media coverage, highlighting developments such as the multi-year college lecturer pay deal, the successful launch of the revised NRPA, and new Fair Work First grant conditions.

CES also continued building its **digital and social media footprint**. There was a particular focus on growing its presence on LinkedIn, where followers increased to 636 from 380 last year. Furthermore, strategic investment in proactive LinkedIn engagement, digital graphics, and animated video helped to enhance reach and visibility. At the time of producing this report, CES' LinkedIn engagement rate for AY 2025/26 was 7.3%, indicating its content is impactful and has resonated strongly with those who see it.

CES also led the process for designing the **new website for the college sector's National Negotiating Committees** for lecturing and professional services staff.

Building on the findings of PA Advocacy's inaugural **MSP Survey** for CES, we have intensified both the frequency and depth of our political outreach. Ahead of May's Holyrood election, the CES Director led targeted, face-to-face engagement with parliamentarians from across the Scottish Parliament. This activity was supported by three comprehensive **written briefings**, which highlighted the multi-year lecturer and professional services staff pay agreements and introduced core CES priorities at the start of the new parliamentary term. Additionally, CES consistently promoted the sector's positive role as an employer, securing **parliamentary motions** to celebrate the national impact of both its Menopause Policy and the multi-year pay settlement for professional services staff.

Finally, in July, CES launched a new **sector-wide newsletter** to provide regular updates to key stakeholders about its activity on behalf of college employers.



"During the 2025/26 academic year, policy momentum accelerated through enhanced college-sector industrial relations and a refreshed national bargaining framework. This collaborative approach yielded multi-year pay agreements for lecturers and professional services staff, offering vital clarity and supporting institutions to invest confidently in their workforces. CES will sustain this partnership work to ensure that excellent employment standards underpin the continued delivery of world-class education to learners."

Callum Chomczuk, Director of CES

Governance

A new governance structure was agreed in March 2025, so this report covers its first year of operation. The March 2026 AGM made some small amendments to the Articles of Association to cover the appointment of an Interim Chair when needed, and allow for a variation in terms of office for Trustees. The new structure is designed to ensure accountability and decision making, while remaining resource effective. The new Board of Trustees consists of up to ten Trustees including:

- A College Chair (Susan Elston, Interim Chair of the Board of Trustees)
- Chair of the College Chairs' Group (Dr Waiyin Hatton)
- Chair of the College Principals' Group (Angela Cox)
- A College Principal (Pete Smith)
- Colleges Scotland's Chief Executive Officer (Gavin Donoghue)
- Up to four independent individuals (Linda Johnston, Dave Anderson, Yekemi Otaru and one vacancy).

The Board of Trustees are also financially accountable for College Employers Scotland (CES), although it devolves all decision-making authority on National Bargaining matters to CES.

The Audit Committee is an advisory committee to the Board of Trustees with no executive powers and has a minimum of three members appointed by the Board of Trustees.

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) is attended by one representative from each company member and associate member, as well as all of the members of the Board of Trustees.

As part of our Corporate Social Responsibility, Colleges Scotland staff raised funds and donations for Start Up Stirling and the Canmore Trust during the year.





Staffing

As at 31 July 2026, Colleges Scotland employed 18 members of staff across the organisation (16.27 full-time equivalent (FTE)). The Policy, Corporate, Communications and Public Affairs teams, comprise of 11 members of staff (9.9 FTE) with some working across both sides of the organisation, and the College Employers Scotland team comprises of 7 members of staff (6.37 FTE) and continues to carry vacancies.

At College Employers Scotland, Steve Farell was appointed as Head of National Bargaining in November 2025, Callum Chomczuk, was appointed Director in January 2026, and Jillian Cheape, Business Services Manager, was promoted to Senior Operations Manager in June 2026. Colleges Scotland appointed Charles Dundas as Corporate Governance Manager in January 2026 and Linda Rankin's role was changed to ICT and Digital Lead in April 2026.

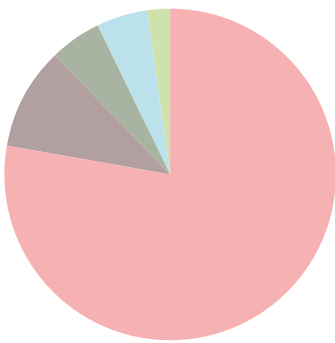
Our offices at Argyll Court has two sub-tenants – ESP and WorldSkills UK, Scotland.

Funding

Colleges Scotland funding comes from two sources – sector subscriptions for Policy, Communications and Corporate, and funding from the SFC for College Employers Scotland.

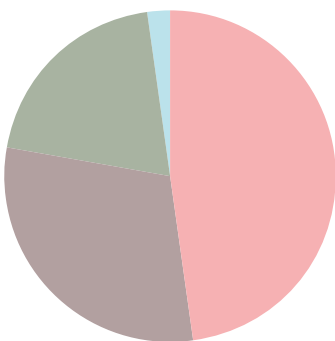
In 2025/26, income from sector subscriptions was £893k for Policy, Communications, Public Affairs and Corporate activity. Income from the SFC for College Employers Scotland was £996k, and a proportion is for corporate service support.

A breakdown of spend and analysis of key activities is outlined below:



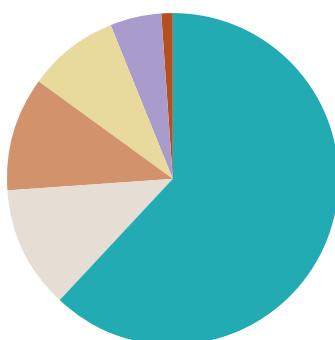
Policy Spend (subscription funding)

- Staffing = 78%
- Service Level Agreement and Office Facilities = 10%
- Other Staffing and Professional Fees = 5%
- Communications, Hospitality and Consumables = 5%
- Depreciation = 2%



Policy Activity

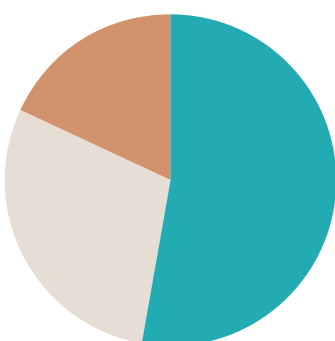
- Policy and Advocacy Activity = 48%
- Colleges Scotland Board and Committees = 30%
- Communications, Parliamentary and Stakeholder Engagement = 20%
- Servicing National Bargaining = 2%



College Employers Scotland Spend (SFC funding)

- Staffing = 62%
- Facilities Time = 12%
- Service Level Agreement and Office Facilities = 11%
- Other Staffing and Professional Fees = 9%
- Communications, Hospitality and Consumables = 5%
- Depreciation = 1%

Not included above is a 5% underspend



College Employers Scotland Activity

- Supporting the NNC = 53%
- Supporting CES Activity = 29%
- Communications, Parliamentary and Stakeholder Engagement = 18%



info@collegesscotland.ac.uk

www.collegesscotland.ac.uk

@CollegesScot



ces@collegeemployersscotland.ac.uk

www.collegeemployersscotland.ac.uk

@CollEmployScot

Argyll Court, Castle Business Park, Stirling, FK9 4TY

Colleges Scotland | Company Limited By Guarantee | Registered in Scotland No: 143210 | Scottish Charity No. SC023848