

Participation Request to SRUC – Elmwood College

Interim Report

1. Aims and Objectives of the Participation Request

A Participation Request (PR) was submitted by Elie & Earlsferry Community Council to the Scottish Rural College (SRUC) in March 2024. The Community Council was seeking improved educational outcomes for the students in Fife through improved local access to land-based courses at Elmwood College.

At Cupar in Fife in the East of Scotland, the SRUC had announced plans to close down and demolish the main building at Elmwood college. They had closed down the student accommodation the previous year. They also intended to seriously scale back on the courses they offered. Horticulture was to be saved.

The Golf Course where greenkeeping and golf course management courses took place was put up for sale. Yet Fife and Scotland have a history steeped in golf. There are at the present time, 44 golf courses in Fife and 550 golf courses in Scotland with many of the most famous courses found on the East and West coast of Scotland which could provide future employment for students with green keeping and golf course management skills.

Elmwood College is the closest land-based studies college in this area. Without it the youngsters face having to travel further afield to study land-based courses, as Fife College does not offer these courses.

The SRUC also intended to cut support services at Elmwood College. These support services are critical, Elmwood is renowned for the support and nurturing of students with learning difficulties and mental health issues, something which is needed more now than ever with an increase in the number of students requiring support. It is essential that this support is delivered in person and not on-line or over the telephone. Elmwood College has proved to be a Centre of Excellence for such students who struggle with on-line and distance learning.

Many students also benefit greatly from Introductory courses which enable them to access National Certificate level courses. It was our understanding that all these Introductory courses were to be cancelled. The view was that the only option for students will be to study in Edinburgh or further afield and probably live away from home, which many will be unable to manage for financial or other reasons.

The Community Council felt that demolishing the main building, and seriously cutting back the courses on offer amounted to a “managed decline” of educational provision at Elmwood College.

In 2018 the SRUC indicated its intention to develop a short life working group which would develop a group Marketing Strategy to grow its revenue by £100m by 2023. So, the proposed changes at Elmwood came as a surprise to many. The community council were also of the belief that the SRUC did not involve all key stakeholders when deciding the future of Elmwood as the on-going protests in person and on social media, as well as the contributions from MSP Willie Rennie attested to. It was felt that these changes could deprive young people throughout Fife of training and employment opportunities.

The Community Council believed that participating in a formal Outcome Improvement Process was essential to improving future plans for Elmwood. This would ensure the voices of the local community and students are heard by including them in a transparent, meaningful dialogue with a clear commitment from all parties to collaborate on improving outcomes. This goes beyond consultation which may be valuable, but does not amount to meaningful participation in designing, delivering, monitoring and reviewing the provision of educational courses.

We felt that we had many constructive ideas we wanted to bring to this process, such as the creation of a new local campus in Cupar, expanding course provision and drawing on alternative sources of funding such as the Rural Housing Initiative, grant-giving trusts and Scottish Government schemes such as the Scottish Rural Development Program.

We then asked the SRUC for comprehensive financial accounts and other information relating to their decision-making on Elmwood, including any consultation they had carried out. We were looking forward to a constructive dialogue.

2.The SRUC Response

As the Community Council had not received confirmation from the SRUC of their receipt of the emailed PR documents which were sent on 17th March, the PR documents were sent on 28th March 2024 by Recorded Delivery to Wayne Powell at the SRUC offices in Edinburgh.

The SRUC acknowledged receipt of the PR on 5th April 2024 and suggested a meeting between Community Council members and SRUC representatives. This meeting was held on 24th April. At the meeting we talked through our group’s desire to improve the outcomes for the students at Elmwood College and the local area and our wish for a Participatory Design Workshop at which we could collect ideas from the staff and students as to how this could be achieved.

We also expressed concern over the Option Appraisal which had apparently led to the decisions taken by the SRUC. We thought that it was flawed and had not taken account in the decision-making process of:

- the impact on the students of cuts in the courses
- the impact on the local economy
- the impact on local businesses
- the impact on students with additional support needs

We then put forward our proposal for a Participatory Design Workshop in which our community group could jointly work together with the SRUC to help create the new design for Elmwood College.

Whilst the SRUC representatives agreed at the meeting to work with us to create an Outcome Improvement Process they were adamant that they would not be stopping in terms of the plans they had made and intended to proceed with the **Site Surgery** as planned. They indicated that they had spoken to the staff and the unions and if we tried to raise hopes and if decisions are delayed because of that, they will go bankrupt. We were surprised and perplexed to hear that if we took any action which got in the way of the SRUC's proposed **Surgical Cuts**, the site at Cupar would be declared bankrupt and closed down.

Sadly, the site looked run down and during the visit there appeared to be no evidence of any significant investment or additional facilities at the site which would make Elmwood more attractive to students, such as those now available at other sites e.g. the Jazz Club and Costa Coffee Cafe at the Barony campus, plus a bar on site with a pool table and juke box. There seemed to be a lack of longer-term planning and investment at the site. There has however been an £8m investment in the Barony site, with £21m invested in the West of Scotland to develop the Digital Dairy Chain and significant capital investment in Inverness to establish a Vet College.

We were advised that the SRUC was £6m in deficit with Elmwood College £1.1m in deficit. They indicated they have the same funding as 4-5 years ago, but costs have gone up. In addition, all government funding for special needs has just been stopped, so their focus is now on industry and meeting their needs as well as trying to attract interest from elsewhere.

Following the meeting we asked for additional information to try and clarify what is planned for the other campuses. One of our concerns was that the cuts which were being made at Elmwood were to bolster the SRUC budget, with few cuts being made at the other campuses. It would seem that a financial update at one their Board meetings

indicated that the SRUC is struggling financially and that may mean selling off assets. They are also looking to get business from overseas.

The SRUC then indicated that a decision notice would be issued by 5th June which they stated was within the legislated timeframe and we would have the opportunity to reply.

We were aware that the main building at Elmwood had a B grade listing. It was found to be notable for its modernist design, its material quality and the survival of original materials and features. The technical or vocational approach to further education is fundamentally a post-war concept and Elmwood College is seen as a major example of a multidiscipline tertiary educational facility of this period in Scotland. Because of this the B grade listing may not be removed. So, we sent a paper to the SRUC detailing proposals for alternative use for the main building, residences and grounds. We felt that with a creative and innovative approach to the use of the site, it could continue to act as a capability centre and hub of knowledge to encourage best practice and provide support and training for all students.

Two Decision Notices were issued by the SRUC. They contained a refusal to be involved in any discussion on the main SRUC campus building at Elmwood and its demolition. SRUC agreed to engage with E&E CC in an evidence-based skills and lifelong learning workshop, to identify how E&E CC could best support SRUC with next steps for SRUC Elmwood. We felt that the additional information contained in the Decision Notice was of a controlling nature:

- SRUC is the decision-making organisation before, during and on conclusion of the workshop.
- The outputs from the workshop can be shared with other parties only with written agreement from the Principal and CEO of SRUC.
- All communications and contact with press or media organisations must be agreed in advance with SRUC's Chief Communications Officer.
- E&E CC are strongly advised to select workshop representatives from its membership who hold relevant and up to date Scottish FE and HE skills and lifelong learning knowledge and experience to ensure a productive and informed discussion.

It is our understanding that the intention of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act is to foster collaborative partnership working to improve outcomes and that in order for this to happen there should be a transparent and open process conducted in a spirit of trust and mutual respect.

We therefore advised the SRUC the intention of the Act is for a move away from a Top-Down situation where the Public Body dictates:

We Will Decide and We will tell you What is going to Happen

To a bottom-up situation where:

The Public Body and the Community Group jointly discuss the Outcome Improvement process and Jointly Decide on the Way Forward

We therefore proposed the following changes to the Outcome Improvement Process Decision Notice as outlined by the SRUC:

- We requested that discussion on the main building be reinstated.
- We did not accept the condition which the SRUC was attempting to impose in relation to contact with the press and the media. We believe this is a country where there is **Freedom of Speech** and if trust is built up between the parties involved, and respect shown, there will be no need for such a condition to be imposed.
- We rejected the recommendation that the Elie & Earlsferry Community Council representatives were required to hold relevant and up-to-date FE and HE skills. We thought that an MBChB degree, a Masters' degree in Public Health, a Masters' degree in Business Administration which included Strategy Development and Marketing and 10 years helping redesign NHS services at National level in the Scottish Government as well as running service redesign workshops across Scotland might be sufficient. One member of our group was also fortunate enough to attend Elmwood College.
- We felt that whilst we may not be up to date on all the nuances of any one particular HE or FE course, which may have an advantage over another, we are fast learners and willing to put in the effort to find a solution which will have benefits not only for the students of Elmwood College, but also for the local community, local businesses and the SRUC. We therefore welcome the opportunity to bring all our skills and knowledge to this initiative and work with the SRUC and other organisations to find a mutually acceptable solution to the issues identified.
- Because of our concern over the reduction in the support staff and services at Elmwood College and the need to ensure that they are retained at a level that keeps the students safe and their needs met, we advised that we would be writing to Maree Todd, Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport and

asking her to investigate the potential negative consequences for the students at Elmwood College if the proposed changes to the support staff and services are put in place as well as the potential breach in the law in relation to the Human Rights Bill and the Equality Act.

However, it was at a later meeting with one of the non-executive directors that our earlier suspicions were confirmed. We were advised that the SRUC wished to shut down and demolish the main buildings at Elmwood College in Cupar and sell the land to a housing developer, in order to reduce the SRUC overall debt. This debt which we believe would have been accrued through their activities at sites across Scotland and its drive for University status had now increased from £6m to £9m and we were told there was a need to enable the SRUC to be financially sustainable. The money obtained from the sale of the golf course, the sale of the agricultural land and the sale of the site at Cupar to a Housing Developer will be used to reduce the SRUC's overall debt.

At that same meeting we were asked to suspend the Participation Request. If we did that, the SRUC would agree to hold a workshop involving 10-12 people with an independent chair. We refused and proposed that the workshop be part of the Outcome Improvement Process.

We were also advised that the SRUC would like to increase the student numbers from the current 300 to 600 but this would be achieved by finding funding to obtain space in other organisations such as Bell Baxter. It was also pointed out that the SRUC did not want to hold any discussion on the main buildings in going forward.

3.Actions taken by the SRUC

The SRUC moved all the students into the one building which remained open. The canteen/café in the main building was no longer available to the students. Apparently, it has been replaced by a vending machine in Elmwood House. The laboratory was to be closed down and cuts were made to the number of available support staff. The golf course at Stratheden was put up for sale. We believe there was a move to cancel the 2024 annual graduation ceremony.

4. Actions taken by our community group

4.1 Parliamentary Debate

Due to concerns over the SRUC's actions and plans for the Elmwood Campus we have been in discussions with MSPs Willie Rennie and Mark Ruskell and Fife Council, following

which both MSPs had discussions on the matter with the SRUC. As one of the major reasons cited by the SRUC for being in debt was the Scottish Government cuts in funding for Higher and Further Education, in April 2024 we asked Mr Rennie and MP Wendy Chamberlain if they could address this with the Government and try to get these cuts reversed and the pledge to deliver £26m (£1m per college) in the 2023-24 budget honoured.

A debate took place in Parliament on 8 May 2024. The majority of the debate focussed on the colleges, the funding cuts which had taken place over the years and the negative consequences for students, staff and the local and national economies. MSP Willie Rennie argued the case well for additional funding for the colleges. He specifically mentioned Elmwood College and got an agreement from the government minister that the minister would meet with Willie Rennie and the SRUC after the debate to discuss the issues at Elmwood College. We were hopeful that this would significantly raise the profile of the College sector.

4.2 Range of alternative viable options for use of the main building

A proposal to develop a short-term working group to look at the possibility of identifying alternative options for use of the site was sent to the SRUC. The options to be considered included:

Business & Economy

- Potential for enterprise office accommodation, hotdesking, co-location, meeting, business and public access facilities.
- Potential for lease or operation of student residences as budget tourism or temporary accommodation.
- Food and Drink Fife Network, Business Improvement
- University St Andrews, Open University learning hub. IT test centres.

Health

- Exploring potential for the location and delivery of medical services, especially community based Mental Health services.
- Opportunity for a community run Horticultural Therapy Garden, looking after Elmwood grounds, working with council colleagues on Duffus Park and SRUC colleagues across the site.
- Potential for lease of an area of the building to a professional veterinary care provider.

Culture and Community

- Provision of a base for Sustainable Cupar

- Provision of a dedicated home and teaching facility for University of the Third Age Cupar to help continue their fantastic development and expansion.
- Provision of a centre for community learning – based in the Elmwood main library.
- Potential of low-cost conversion of the current Elmwood sports hall into a cinema/screen space so that a big screen can be retained in NEF
- A community café, community lounge, meeting spaces and public facilities of significant scope and size to accommodate the general public and wide range of community activity.
- Potential for an expanded home for Cupar Heritage Trust and a heritage museum/attraction, perhaps located in the main hall.

4.3 Letter to Maree Todd

Following the cut in the number of support staff, we wrote to MSP Maree Todd, Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport and asked her to investigate the situation at Elmwood College in relation to the cuts in support staff provision.

5. Progress to-date

It is now 8 months since we submitted the Participation Request to the Scottish Rural College.

- A date has now been provided for the workshop (28 November 2024).
- The golf course is now no longer for sale. It is our understanding that it is now under new management and the situation at the golf course has greatly improved. Further research has revealed that previously between 30 – 50 students annually studied green-keeping at Elmwood College. The practical on-site training and assessments for NC level included the following:
 1. Grass Cutting – ride on & pedestrian mowers
 2. Fertilising -calibration & application
 3. Construction – Tee/Bunker
 4. Machinery set up plus sharpening the machines
 5. Course set up – bunker raking, tee markers placement, dew removal, hole changing
 6. Cultural practices – aeration, scarifying, verge-cutting & topdressing
 7. Health + safety – risk assessments etc
 8. Tree maintenance/planting

It became apparent when talking to the head greenkeeper of one of the local golf courses that much of that learning requires to take place on-site and not on-line.

The students need to be on-site to learn how to drive and operate the extremely large pieces of machinery required to manage and maintain the golf courses, to learn how to sharpen the equipment and to gain the Health and Safety knowledge required to keep themselves and others safe on the golf course.

As there is currently a huge shortage of trained greenkeepers, there is a great opportunity for Elmwood Golf Course to increase the number of students attending on-site courses. This would assist the SRUC in achieving the additional 300 students which it wishes to recruit for Elmwood and generate additional income. The extreme shortage of greenkeepers is evidenced by a recent questionnaire sent out by a company in St Andrews reacting to demand, which sought views on whether they should attempt to provide greenkeeping courses. As there is therefore a definite demand for local on-site training, Elmwood is ideally placed to take advantage of that and meet that demand.

- It also came to our attention that this year's graduation ceremony might not be taking place at Elmwood College. However, we believe that the students and staff rebelled and fought this. The ceremony was then eventually allowed to proceed, and everyone enjoyed it.
- We have requested a draft of the SRUC input to the workshop agenda to which we will add our contribution, but as yet have not received a response. However, having heard that the SRUC is keen to increase the student numbers at Elmwood, we have put several proposals to the SRUC for discussion at the workshop.

They include the following:

Creation of a shared campus

With Cupar being a strategic development area, 1,400 houses are planned for Cupar North, an additional 350 pupils will be expected once the new houses have been built, Bell Baxter may face a capacity problem, and this may provide an opportunity for a joint development with Elmwood.

Some college facilities and taster courses which could include lectures, discussions and tutorial sessions could be provided on Bell Baxter land with the wider provision of services and courses being provided in the old or the new building at Elmwood College, if the B grade listing is removed. These taster sessions would provide the students with a taste of what it is like to study the real subjects being delivered by Elmwood College. It will give them a chance to try a course before they apply. This will ensure that the students enjoy the courses they eventually attend and not regret their choice as has happened to a number of students in the past.

It would also address the concerns of the pupils at Bell Baxter, as noted in the FE Curriculum for NE Fife, who were strongly opposed to a shared high school-college

campus, with concerns over cultural differences and practices/policies on matters such as smoking, uniforms and teaching styles. In addition, it noted that students keen to get away from school are unlikely to find this appealing.

However, a *state of the art* Learning Campus has recently been opened at Dunfermline by MSP Jenny Gilruth. Both Woodmill and St Columba's High school pupils will not only have their own parts of the Campus but will be able to share the other available facilities. Fife College is expected to move into the Campus next year.

Since the loss of many courses at Elmwood College, Bell Baxter, Madras and Waid have limited access to college provision. We suspect that nowhere near a fifth of pupils in our local secondary schools "learn with college" as per this 2021 report. See <https://www.cdn.ac.uk/school-college-partnership-report-co-creating-learner-journey/>.

Yet the report 'Co-Creating the Learner Journey: School-College Partnerships and Effective Skills Pathways' recognises the role that colleges and schools working together can play in supporting skills for life and work, the learner journey and regional planning. It states that "School-College Partnerships lie at the heart of a significant and progressive intervention into the way we prepare young people for the world of work, and indeed the wider world".

The report noted that Colleges, with their long-established relationships with employers through delivering apprenticeships in a variety of trades and subjects, were identified as the key vehicle for improving vocational training across the whole education system. Courses were designed on the principle of young people spending part of their week in school and part in college as a matter of routine. In addition, the report identified that many colleges have experience of providing successful transition courses to allow young people with additional support needs, who may have struggled to engage in school, to be supported to develop their life skills in a more personalised and flexible learning environment. The 'Transitions to Learning and Work' programme at Glasgow Kelvin College was seen as a good example of this.

The report also stated that in the past few years the number of young people involved in School-College Partnerships has exceeded 60,000 and has seen significant year on year increases. It has now reached the point where a significant proportion of college activity (around 22%) can be defined as being part of a School-College Partnership and these activities support all stages of the learner journey from Primary to Senior Phase including pupils with additional support needs.

There is therefore, at this point in time, a great opportunity to work collaboratively with Scotland's Rural College and Bell Baxter to help design and create a Campus similar to

the Learning Campus established in Dunfermline and ensure that Scotland's Rural College is at the forefront of supporting and providing School-College Partnerships in this area that support the learner's understanding of career pathways and skills requirements from an early age, and which when coupled with strong employer relationships will encourage experience of the workplace and support career planning.

Apprenticeships

Working in partnership with Bell Baxter, the local SMEs and micro-businesses, the farming community and other land-based organisations, the skills requirements and relevant educational courses and training packages including a wider range of modern apprenticeships can be explored.

Ring-fenced funding

We believe that funding from the sale of the assets at Elmwood College should be ring-fenced and used to pay for the creation of a new building at Elmwood College if the B grade listing is removed. This would cover the costs in relation to the survey of the land at Elmwood College, architectural drawings for a new modern building which is fit for purpose, to be placed on the site of the old building if it is to be demolished and for completion of the new building.

If the B grade listing stays in place, new additional sources of funding to ensure the long-term financial viability of both the SRUC and Elmwood College could be explored at the workshop. Any new funding could be allocated to the provision of courses at Bell Baxter if there is a decision to go down this shared campus route or the alternative viable opportunities for the campus to become a shared community space could be revisited and the funding used to refurbish and modernise the old building.

Co-option of local stakeholders to the SRUC board

We recommend that 2 key local stakeholders are co-opted onto the SRUC board. This would enable the voices and views of the local community to be heard and acted upon as we move through the Outcome Improvement Process and monitor and review it over the next 1-2 years to see whether the planned outcomes have been achieved.

We are of the opinion that the welfare and experience of the students at Elmwood College along with their educational outcomes should be front and central in any further decision-making in relation to the Elmwood Campus, as should Fife and its economy. So, in moving forward, let's **Build Back Better**. We look forward to working with the SRUC to see how that can be achieved.

Dr Angela Anderson: Chair Elie & Earlsferry Community Council

Kirsty Barclay: Elie & Earlsferry Community Council

Carol Birrell: Elie & Earlsferry Community Council

25th October 2024

