

2 September 2009

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Dear John

Inverness College Campus Development

The quarterly meeting of SCDI's Highlands and Islands Committee earlier this month represented its first opportunity to discuss the recent consultation on Inverness College's proposed campus development. Following discussion of both options, the Committee agreed that I should convey their views to the College and key partners in the project.

Inverness College can be tremendously proud of the progress which the follow-up review by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education found has been made under your leadership. This was also evident on SCDI members' visit earlier in the summer. We recognise that stability and certainty are high priorities as the College seeks to maintain this progress and focus on continuing to meet the needs of its current student demographic and staff. SCDI believes that the optimal outcome would be for it do so while also supporting the wider economic and social opportunities for the Highlands and Islands, as have been identified by independent economic consultants Cogentsi, commissioned by HIE. With this outcome in mind, SCDI has the following comments to make on the two options.

At present, the redevelopment of Inverness College on the existing site would appear to be a lower risk option for the College with reduced new infrastructure requirements. The site meets the needs of the current student population, the majority of who are in Further Education courses, and has reasonable public transport access and nearby amenities. The report by Cogentsi has found that, subject to the purchase of adjacent properties and a successful planning application, it could accommodate an expanded college and possibly about 200 residencies. This would contribute about £75m a year to the local economy.

However, the new facilities which can be developed on the existing site are unlikely to be comparable to and competitive with other Scottish and international Higher Education institutions. Nor is redevelopment of the existing site likely to be a sufficient catalyst for the wider regeneration of the Longman area of the city. SCDI does not believe, therefore, that it would be as attractive to local, national and international students choosing the location of their studies. As a result, while there seem to be fewer uncertainties in redeveloping at Longman and the economic benefits are still significant, SCDI does not

believe that it represents the optimal option for future students, the growth of Inverness or in realising the wider economic and social opportunities for the Highlands and Islands.

In contrast, the Beechwood site offers far greater scope to develop high quality, integrated facilities, including a total of 800 residencies, which would be attractive to and better serve local, national and international students and staff at Inverness College UHI. This alone would generate a much greater economic leverage. Cogentsi calculated that, at £147m a year, the development would contribute almost twice as much to the economy.

Moreover, among the other facilities which the site could accommodate would be a potential phase IV of the Centre for Health Science and a science and technology park for businesses linked to the university and other establishments. With more young people retained in and attracted to the Highlands for their studies, and rewarding career and entrepreneurial opportunities in this cluster of innovative companies around the campus, the Beechwood site would create additional economic benefits, and Cogentsi estimates, support the region's population outcomes with 20,000 more people working in the area.

These improved career prospects would be of great value to the young people who Inverness College will serve and the economic and social benefits would be of strategic importance to Inverness, the Inner Moray Firth, and the Highlands and Islands region.

This is reflected in the Scottish Government's National Planning Framework 2, which is concerned with how Scotland should develop over the next 20-25 years and where things need to happen to make that possible. It states: "Higher education has a key role to play in developing the knowledge economy in rural areas. The UHI Millennium Institute with its campus at Beechwood in Inverness and constituent colleges throughout the Highlands and Islands" is an excellent, pioneering example in "building new centres of expertise and creativity, providing high-level jobs, offering opportunities for people to study locally, developing international links and attracting students from around the world."

The larger green-field site at Beechwood does, at present, appear to involve higher risks, with greater infrastructure needs, especially in respect of transport access for students, and fewer amenities. But the answer is not to redevelop on the existing site, but for Highlands and Islands Enterprise and The Highland Council to provide the necessary clarity and reassurances on these points in order to mitigate the risks. SCDI hopes that they will be able to offer Inverness College firmer plans for road, rail, subsidised bus and pedestrian access to Beechwood, and demonstrate how they envisage further amenities for students will become available as the centre of gravity of the City moves to the east.

In conclusion, SCDI's Highlands and Islands Committee recommends that Inverness College develops its new campus at Beechwood and trusts that all parties will work together to secure this, the best future for the young people it will serve and our economy.

Yours sincerely

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