

# **A consultation on the Rural and Islands College Merger proposal**

**February 2023**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Government is seeking views on a proposal put forward by the boards of management of North Highland College (UHI North Highland), West Highland College (UHI West Highland) and Lews Castle College (UHI Outer Hebrides) to merge into a single, incorporated college<sup>1</sup>.

The merging parties have suggested a “host” model, whereby the assets and liabilities of West Highland College and Lews Castle College are transferred to North Highland College to create the merged college. Under [section 3 of the Further and Higher Education \(Scotland\) Act 1992](#) (“the 1992 Act”) the power to establish, merge or close colleges of further education rests with the Scottish Ministers. These powers can only be exercised in relation to colleges which are incorporated under the 1992 Act. West Highland College is not incorporated under the 1992 Act and it is proposed that it would be wound up and the assets transferred through other non-statutory means. The Scottish Ministers have no role in that process.

Both Lews Castle College and North Highland College are incorporated colleges. Should the Scottish Ministers decide to proceed as is proposed in regard to this merger, a statutory instrument would be laid in the Scottish Parliament to close and transfer the assets of Lews Castle College.

Where there is a proposal to exercise these powers, Ministers must consult:

- the education authority for the area in which the college is or, as the case may be, is to be situated;
- the Scottish Funding Council;
- the boards of management of the college or colleges concerned;
- any regional strategic body for such a college;
- the representatives of any trade union which is recognised by such a board of management or which otherwise appears to the Scottish Ministers to be representative of its staff;
- the students' association of each such college.

The Boards of Management of the three colleges have proposed the merged college be re-named as UHI North, West and Hebrides. [Section 3\(4\) of the 1992 Act](#) provides that the governing body of a college of further education may, with the consent of the Scottish Ministers, change the name of the college or of the governing body. Although not a statutory requirement, Scottish Ministers are seeking views on the proposed new name for the merged college as part of this consultation.

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<sup>1</sup> The term incorporated college refers to a college with a board of management established under [the Further and Higher Education \(Scotland\) Act 1992](#).

## **About This Consultation**

The purpose of this consultation is to seek views on the proposed merger of UHI North Highland, UHI West Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides (Lews Castle College) into a single, new incorporated college. Details of the merger proposal are provided below.

## **Responding To This Consultation**

We are inviting responses to this consultation by **midnight 5 May 2023**.

Please respond to this consultation using the Scottish Government online consultation platform, Citizen Space. You can view and respond to this consultation online at <https://consult.gov.scot/lifelong-learning-and-skills/rural-and-islands-college-merger-proposal>. You can save and return to your response while the consultation is still open. Please ensure that consultation responses are submitted before the closing date of 5 May 2023.

If you are unable to respond online, the Scottish Government will by exception accept postal responses. Please complete the Respondent Information Form (see 'Handling your response' below), and send this along with your response to:

College Governance Team  
5 Atlantic Quay  
150 Broomielaw  
Glasgow  
G2 8LU

## **Handling Your Response**

If you respond using the consultation hub, you will be directed to the About You page before submitting your response. Please indicate how you wish your response to be handled and, in particular, whether you are content for your response to be published. If you ask for your response not to be published, we will regard it as confidential, and we will treat it accordingly.

All respondents should be aware that the Scottish Government is subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 and would therefore have to consider any request made to it under the Act for information relating to responses made to this consultation exercise.

If you are unable to respond via Citizen Space, please complete and return the Respondent Information Form included in this document.

To find out how we handle your personal data, please see our privacy policy:

[Scottish Government Privacy Policy](#)

## **Next Steps In The Process**

Where respondents have given permission for their response to be made public, and after we have checked that they contain no potentially defamatory material, responses will be made available to the public at <http://consult.gov.scot>. If you use the consultation hub to respond, you will receive a copy of your response via email.

Following the closing date, all responses will be analysed and considered along with any other available evidence to help us. Responses will be published where we have been given permission to do so. An analysis report will also be made available.

## **Comments And Complaints**

If you have any comments about how this consultation exercise has been conducted, please write to us using the contact details above.

## **Scottish Government Consultation Process**

Consultation is an essential part of the policymaking process. It gives us the opportunity to consider your opinion and expertise on a proposed area of work.

You can find all our consultations online: <http://consult.gov.scot>. Each consultation details the issues under consideration, as well as a way for you to give us your views, either online, by email or by post.

Responses will be analysed and used as part of the decision making process, along with a range of other available information and evidence. We will publish a report of this analysis for every consultation. Depending on the nature of the consultation exercise the responses received may:

- indicate the need for policy development or review
- inform the development of a particular policy
- help decisions to be made between alternative policy proposals
- be used to finalise legislation before it is implemented

While details of particular circumstances described in a response to a consultation exercise may usefully inform the policy process, consultation exercises cannot address individual concerns and comments, which should be directed to the relevant public body.

## CONSULTATION PAPER

The information provided in this section has been taken from the [Proposed Merger of UHI North Highland, West Highland and Lews Castle Colleges Consultation Summary](#) provided by the Boards of Management of North Highland College, West Highland College and Lews Castle College. **The information and views expressed below are therefore those of the proposed merging parties; not the Scottish Government.**

A copy of the full merger proposal document can be found at:

[Merger proposal - Rural and Islands College Merger Project \(uhi.ac.uk\)](#)

### Merger Proposal Summary

#### Why Are The Colleges Exploring Merger?

In early 2021, the boards of management at UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland commissioned a review into their long-term strategic future. The merging parties note that all three colleges face similar challenges in their rural and island contexts, including:

- Student recruitment
- Real-term funding cuts
- A small, declining youth demographic
- Curriculums that can overlap or compete with each other
- Lack of capacity to respond to regional opportunities
- Requirement for estates investment

These challenges have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and cost of living crisis. A Partnership Board was formed in September 2021 to formally explore the option of merger. An initial consultation took place with staff, students, and the public in early 2022. The merging parties advise that feedback from the initial consultation has supported the development of the full merger proposal and business case, published 8 August 2022.

### The Colleges

#### UHI North Highland

UHI North Highland has campuses in Thurso, Halkirk, Dornoch and Aness. Thurso is home to the Engineering, Technology and Energy Centre, the largest and best equipped facility of its kind in the North of Scotland. Its courses in equine studies, gamekeeping and land management, and golf management, attract a high number of students from outwith the region. World class research is led through its Environmental Research Institute, which focusses on environmental issues affecting the region and the sustainable use of natural resources.

UHI North Highland currently employs 253 staff and serves 2147 further education students, 388 higher education students and 90 postgraduate students (2020/21).

### **UHI Outer Hebrides (Lews Castle College)**

UHI Outer Hebrides has campuses in Stornoway, North Uist, South Uist, Barra and Benbecula. It has highly regarded specialisms and research in areas including digital pedagogy, energy engineering, archaeology and sustainable development, and plays a strong role in supporting creative industries, including Gaelic music, language and culture. Its Centre for Online Research and Education supports education research and enhancement in learning and teaching practice, while its Innovation Centre facilitates small business innovation and graduate business start-up.

UHI Outer Hebrides currently employs 139 staff and serves 875 further education students, 350 higher education students and 270 postgraduate students (2020/21).

### **UHI West Highland**

UHI West Highland has 10 campuses and learning centres across Lochaber, Skye and Wester Ross including Fort William, Ullapool, Gairloch, Auchtertyre, Broadford, Portree, Mallaig, Kilchoan, Strontian and Kinlochleven. Its unique specialisms are in outdoor adventure and marine tourism through its School of Adventure Studies and its Centre for Recreation and Tourism Research. Its Advancing Manufacturing Centre provides support to small and medium sized business in the region, while its 'Virtual School' offer is widening access to senior phase courses for pupils at secondary schools throughout the region.

It currently employs 190 staff and serves 2484 further education students, 666 higher education students and 4 postgraduate students (2020/21).

### **The Colleges' Vision For The Future**

The merging parties are of the view that merging will create an anchor institution of scale and impact within the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), and the region, supporting 9000 students and 600 staff across 19 rural and island campuses and learning centres in the Highlands, Skye, and Western Isles. Coming together presents an exciting opportunity to do things better – to thrive, not just survive. The merging parties have set out that the proposed merger will:

- Combine their collective talent, expertise, and resources to create a stronger, more resilient and efficient staffing structure, which expands opportunities for professional development and protects local jobs.
- Become more financially resilient, with a robust strategy which is better placed to respond to the immediate and future changes and challenges in the financial environment.

- Develop their tertiary curriculum to provide a wider learning offer for students, aligned with the priorities of the Scottish Government and the future skills needs of the region's economy.
- Grow research and innovation collaboratively to create greater impact across the region.
- Focus their collective strengths on pursuing key commercial and business development growth opportunities, particularly in the blue and green economies.
- Enhance the student experience by providing a more consistent, high-quality experience across learning and teaching and support, including improved access to technology, facilities and social opportunities.
- Create efficiencies which allow the merged college to reinvest savings directly into the college and staff, ensuring the aspirations within the business case for merger are met.



## Vision, Mission And Values

The merging parties have set out their vision, mission and values for the merger as below.

Vision	To be an anchor institution for the region – a connected, flexible, and sustainable learning organisation, opening doors to a world of opportunity.				
Mission	We will connect rural and island Scotland, pioneering distinctive education and research opportunities to enable our students and communities to shape their future in a changing world.				
Branding Values	Successful students	Thriving communities		Sustainable organisations	
	<p><b>Trust</b></p> <p>We take pride in what we do. We are highly trusted by our students, our staff and our partners. Recognised for our leadership and dedication to deliver more for all whom we serve.</p>	<p><b>Integrity</b></p> <p>We take responsibility for all that we do, assuring transparency and accountability. We ensure people are at the heart of everything we do and that our organisation operates in collaboration and openness, with an ethos of dignity and respect for everyone.</p>		<p><b>Excellence</b></p> <p>We are ambitious for our learners, our staff, our college and our communities. We drive innovation, aim to be sector leaders, and benchmark our performance on national and international standards.</p>	
Behaviours	<p><b>Be bold</b></p> <p>We are confident in our ability to transform tertiary education for our region, connecting individuals and communities to learning and education.</p>		<p><b>Be agile</b></p> <p>We encourage new ways of thinking, supporting our people to explore new ways of thinking and doing things and responding and adapting quickly through research and innovation.</p>		<p><b>Be collaborative</b></p> <p>People working together are at the heart of everything we do. We value our ability to collaborate through a diverse workforce, where every voice matters.</p>
Key strategies and plans	<p><b>Learning &amp; teaching strategy</b></p> <p>To include curriculum plan, Learning, teaching and digital skills strategy.</p>	<p><b>Student experiences &amp; engagement strategy</b></p> <p>To include student engagement plan, student experience plan, HISA engagement plan</p>	<p><b>Research strategy</b></p> <p>To include research strategy and knowledge exchange plan.</p>	<p><b>Gaelic language strategy</b></p>	<p><b>Business development &amp; growth</b></p> <p>To include business development, stakeholder engagement plan and internationalisation plan.</p>
Underpinning strategies and plans	<p><b>Estates &amp; ICT Strategy</b></p> <p>To include estates plan, digital plan, sustainability plan</p>		<p><b>People, Organisation &amp; Culture strategy</b></p> <p>To include equality and diversity plan, human resources and organisational development plan, communities plan, culture development programme.</p>		<p><b>Finance strategy</b></p>

## Guiding Principles And Commitments

The merging parties have set out three guiding principles:

### 1. Building for a better future

Creating capacity and enhancing management and leadership to focus on growth and investment

### 2. Doing more, not less

Enabling more innovation, curriculum, research and commercial growth to benefit staff, students and communities.

### 3. Remaining local

Becoming a college with scale and impact, which benefits from a single board of management, executive team, and strategy, whilst ensuring local management and operations, a strong local presence in communities, and continued local stakeholder relations.

As part of the merger process, the colleges are committed to:

- No compulsory redundancies as a direct result of merger.
- To work proactively and collaboratively with staff, students, external stakeholders and trade unions throughout the process.
- Incorporated status for a new, merged college, ensuring staff have access to public sector terms and conditions, including pension schemes.
- National pay negotiations, national bargaining, and fair working conditions.
- Reinvesting any savings identified from the proposed merger into curriculum, staff or estate.
- Maintaining local perspectives and needs in all that they do through appointing local advisory committees across the region who feed into the main college board of management.

## Key Themes

The merging parties believe that merging provides an opportunity to fully embrace their role as a tertiary institution.

Together, the colleges intend to provide one aligned curriculum plan, a joined-up, coherent delivery service, and a consistent approach to learning and teaching and research. The merging parties believe the merged college will have a stronger, more coordinated voice, which enhances their reputation and relationship with stakeholders and connects rural and island communities to fully support access to 'lifelong learning' without the need to leave the region.

The merging parties have set out the following themes to drive the merged colleges' aims and aspirations:

- **An anchor institution for the region:** the merged college will play a key role in driving economic renewal and transformational change through education, research, upskilling, and reskilling.

- **Collaboration for resilience and sustainability:** by pooling resources, building collective teams/services and the sharing of expertise, the merged college will become a more resilient and financially sustainable organisation.
- **Innovative tertiary education:** the merged will deliver an accessible and coherent tertiary curriculum to support the development of skills across the region, demonstrating positive student outcomes and maximising accessibility and value for money.
- **Excellent student experience, invested in place:** the merged college will align with the diverse needs of current and future students and employers ensuring it enhances the models of face to face learning, blended learning, and online learning.
- **Thriving communities and place:** the merged college will develop and implement a regional estates strategy that will continue to invest in state-of-the-art facilities, tailored for community use and the changing needs of the student body.
- **Enhanced research activity, connections, and knowledge exchange:** the merged college will increase and strengthen its research culture and impact this has on the region, with greater opportunities for staff and students to become research active through strengthening current specialisms and coordinating teaching effectively.
- **Impactful economic investment:** the merged college will collaboratively develop and maintain a portfolio of commercial and consultancy offers that are relevant and responsive to the needs of both private and public organisations in key economic sectors across the region.
- **Enabling the region's culture through Gaelic language, regional dialects, and Nordic cultures:** the merged college will continue to work with national Gaelic agencies to take a stronger role in supporting the development of Gaelic teacher education and through development of online and blended delivery programmes ranging from short courses to full online degree.

## Key Benefits Of Merger

The merging parties have set out a number of key benefits for students, staff and communities as noted below.

For students:

- A wider, more reliable learning offer for students to choose from, providing clear progression pathways and routes into employment or further study.
- More opportunities for students to study speciality programmes unique to each college, including adventure tourism, golf, land management, sustainability, and archaeology.
- A more consistent student experience across the 19 learning centres and campuses through the sharing of good practice in learning and teaching and student support.
- Enhanced online course content ensuring consistent, high-quality learning, wherever you choose to study. A stronger student voice and social offer through creating a stronger local HISA team to support students locally and compliment the regional offerings that already exist.

- A more streamlined, equitable learning journey – from enquiry through to application, to induction, learning, and graduation - through shared knowledge, skills, resources and processes.
- Investment in technology, student support and estate – including student accommodation.

For staff:

- Increased opportunities for staff to work collaboratively, share knowledge and experience, enhance best practice, and develop new approaches.
- Increased personal and professional development opportunities including progression, secondments and specialisms.
- Improved job satisfaction, staff morale, and flexibility through the creation of stronger, larger and more resilient teams.
- Improved job security through the creation of a more financially sustainable organisation.
- Increased capacity to do more, not less, including curriculum development, collaborations, research, innovation and enterprise.
- Increased access to specialist advice and support, whether academic, professional or personal.
- Access to public sector terms and conditions, including pension schemes, and a commitment to national pay negotiations, national bargaining and fair working conditions.

For communities:

- Investment in estates to support local communities through face-to-face learning opportunities.
- Investment in specialist infrastructure, widening access to support online and digital capability.
- Creation of a unified organisation with one voice. A single point of contact for partners and stakeholders. Capacity to strengthen existing relationships and develop new partnerships which continue to support the economic, social and cultural growth of communities.
- Increase the learning offer for students, aligned to the needs of local employers, and regional and national priorities, helping to encourage/attract people to stay and live in local communities.
- Create a more financially sustainable organisation which maintains locally-based, high quality jobs, helping to encourage/attract people to stay and live in local communities.
- Proactively focusing on culture, tradition and language to support the retainment of local identities across the Highlands, Skye and Western Isles, including a commitment to drive forward the revitalisation of Gaelic.

## **Leadership And Governance**

A Partnership Board was established in September 2021 to ensure effective governance arrangements in working towards the creation of a merged college, with delegated authority from the Boards of Management at UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland.

The Partnership Board will oversee the appointment of a Principal Designate, Transition Board and Local Advisory Committees. The merging parties believe this process will ensure both strategic and local leadership is in place as the merger progresses, reflecting best practice in corporate governance.

**The merging parties believe that Local Advisory Committees will ensure:**

- A strong link to local communities, ensuring the local voice is heard in all decisions.
- Local oversight during planning and implementation.
- A new college delivers on its ambitions for local communities and is responsive to strategic opportunities, projects and partnerships.

Membership of the Transition Board and Local Advisory Committees will be drawn primarily from current college board members, with opportunities for new members to be recruited. Each Local Advisory Committee will have a chair and vice chair, who are members of the Transition Board.

The Transition Board will become the new college's Board of Management on vesting date and will oversee key functions including learning and teaching, finance and audit, estates management, human resources and organisational development.

## Consultation Questions

### Question 1

What are your views on the college merger proposal?

### Question 2

How do you view the impact of the merger on further and higher education provision and delivery in the Highlands and Islands region?

### Question 3

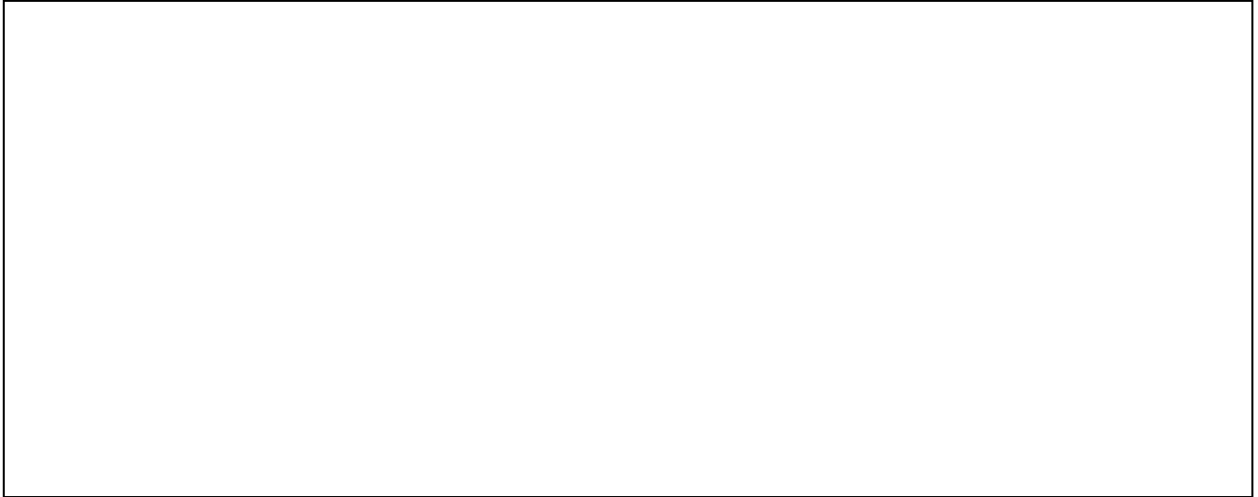
To what extent do you agree with the rationale for merger as set out by the Board of Management of the three colleges?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Please give reasons for your answer.

**Question 4**

What impact, if any, will the merger have on your own organisation, and your service users, staff and potential employees?



**Question 5**

Do you have any views on the proposed new name of the merged college?



## RURAL AND ISLANDS COLLEGE MERGER PROPOSAL

### Respondent Information Form

**Please Note** this form **must** be completed and returned with your response.

To find out how we handle your personal data, please see our privacy policy:

[Scottish Government Privacy Policy](#)

Are you responding as an individual or an organisation?

- Individual
- Organisation

Full name or organisation's name

Phone number

Address

Postcode

Email Address

The Scottish Government would like your

permission to publish your consultation response. Please indicate your publishing preference:

- Publish response with name
- Publish response only (without name)
- Do not publish response

#### Information for organisations:

The option 'Publish response only (without name)' is available for individual respondents only. If this option is selected, the organisation name will still be published.

If you choose the option 'Do not publish response', your organisation name may still be listed as having responded to the consultation in, for example, the analysis report.

We will share your response internally with other Scottish Government policy teams who may be addressing the issues you discuss. They may wish to contact you again in the future, but we require your permission to do so. Are you content for Scottish Government to contact you again in relation to this consultation exercise?

- Yes
- No





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