

# Participation Request to SRUC – Elmwood College

## Final Report

### 1. Submission of a Participation Request to the SRUC

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 but the Golf Course where greenkeeping and golf course management courses took place was put up for sale. The SRUC also intended to cut support services at Elmwood College.

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.

Due to concern over the actions taken by the SRUC, in March 2024, Elie & Earlsferry Community Council submitted a Participation Request to the Scottish Rural College (SRUC). The Community Council felt that demolishing the main building, seriously cutting back the courses on offer and selling of the assets amounted to a “managed decline” of educational provision at Elmwood College.

At an initial meeting in March 2024 with SRUC representatives, the SRUC agreed to work with the community group to create an Outcome Improvement Process. But the Community Council group felt that progress was difficult – the main building was not up for discussion and at the first meeting with the SRUC, it was threatened that if the community group took any action that raised hopes or got in the way of the SRUC’s **Surgical Cuts**, the site at Cupar would be declared bankrupt and closed down.

It was later declared at a subsequent meeting that the SRUC wished to shut down and demolish the main buildings and sell the land to a housing developer, and together with the sale of the agricultural land and the golf course, the funds would be used to reduce SRUC’s overall debt. The debt is believed to have been accrued through SRUC’s activities at other sites across Scotland and its drive for University status.

The Interim Report on the Community Council group’s experience of the Participation Request can be accessed here:

<https://www.scdc.org.uk/participation-requests/case-studies>

<https://www.scdc.org.uk/participation-request-resource/2024/5/28/z1n2yjli08y0fdm2550yakzofypczp-l48fb>

## **2. Outcome Improvement Workshop**

The Outcome Improvement Workshop, which was attended by representatives from the SRUC, along with a student representative and the Elie & Earlsferry community group finally got under way in November 2024.

We were pleased to hear at the workshop that the Golf Course is to be retained. The attempted sale of the Golf Course and reduction in the number of land-based courses being provided at Elmwood made no sense to us at all. Scotland is the Home of Golf, with 587 courses. Over 50 of these courses which includes the world-famous Old Course in St Andrews are available in Fife where those trained in green-keeping and golf course management can obtain future employment. In addition, the Golf Course at Cupar was the only course in Scotland offering **Intro** courses.

However, we were advised the golf course is now to be run on a commercial basis. This would mean that the Green-keeping and Golf Course management training would no longer be provided at the course at Stratheden, but the Golf Course would be available for use by local golfers. In our opinion, the move by the SRUC away from the original vision for Elmwood is very concerning and, in our opinion, this may result in a huge loss to the land-based golf course workforce.

We were also concerned to hear at the workshop that a school/college partnership might not be an option for Bell Baxter. This was surprising as the school had been contacted earlier by a member of our community group and was keen to assist and help.

It was however encouraging to hear at the workshop that the SRUC is keen to continue to support the apprenticeship model and would be providing a management team to take this forward.

It was also acknowledged that in a time of low unemployment and particularly post-EU exit, every employment sector is seeking to better inform and gain greater access to the key influencers: teachers, parents and the formal career service. For the voice of relatively niche areas to be heard, there is a need to 're-frame' what the land-based industries can offer young people and career changers. The often-negative perceptions need to be addressed by a clearer coordinated and innovative communication strategy.

## **3. Next Steps in the Outcome Improvement process**

At the end of the workshop, we raised the matter of the need to establish a working group which will monitor and review the Outcome Improvement Process. In December 2024 we sent the SRUC a paper on the **Next Steps in the Outcome Improvement Process**. By February 2025 when we had received no response from the SRUC in relation to the setting up of a working group, we contacted the SRUC to try and agree a date for taking this forward.

However, on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2025 the SRUC announced that the 2-hour workshop held in November 2024 comprised the complete end to end Outcome Improvement Process.

They would not be forming a working group to look at ways to improve the outcomes for the students and staff at Elmwood College.

We were of the belief that the initial workshop was only an introductory first step in the Outcome Improvement Process. In our opinion it did not result in the creation of any specific or detailed Co-designed Outcome Improvement Process. Clear aims and objectives in relation to improving the students' facilities, the student and staff experience, the learning opportunities/educational courses available and the educational outcomes were not discussed or agreed. Nor did the workshop identify the details of the specific outcomes to be achieved and what success would look like, or the means by which these outcomes would be measured. In our opinion these steps in the Outcome Improvement Process have yet to be undertaken. An initial planning meeting to identify and distribute resources, delegate tasks, and **co-design** the outcome improvement process has yet to take place.

We then provided the SRUC with information on the Participation Request Toolbox which explains in detail all the steps in the Outcome Improvement Process; A Guide to developing an Outcome Improvement Process - Scottish Centre for Development in the Community. As detailed in the Participation Request Toolbox, the initial meetings should be all about building cooperation:

Whilst the SRUC confirmed that the need for community engagement and communication by the SRUC was a strong takeaway from the workshop and Elie & Earlsferry Community Council would be one of the community stakeholders that SRUC would look to engage with moving forward, they intended to take matters forward by themselves and would engage with others when appropriate.

#### **4. Closure of the Animal Care Unit**

Less than 2 weeks later, with no prior notice being given, the SRUC suddenly announced the closure of the Animal Care Unit at Elmwood at the end of the academic year. With only 2 subjects left i.e. gamekeeping and horticulture on which they will be delivering courses, we didn't see a long-term future for Elmwood. Anyone wishing to study animal care after the 2024-2025 will have to do so at another campus. Northeast Fife MSP Willie Rennie called on the SRUC to reverse its decision.

As a result of this announcement, a meeting of the students and staff took place in the Animal Care Unit. The students invited MSP Willie Rennie, MP Wendy Chamberlain and members of our community group to attend. Following that meeting, a campaign group has been established to tackle what would seem to be a new attempt by the SRUC to shut down the facilities at Elmwood College and degrade the site.

#### **5. Managed Decline Approach**

We believe that the **Managed Decline** approach and the stripping of the assets at Elmwood College has been adopted by the SRUC in order to deal with their £9m debt, the majority of which we believe (approximately £8m) has been accrued by activities at their other sites in Scotland. It is also our understanding that the SRUC now wishes to close

down the Animal Care unit in order to increase the value of the land that the College sits on, when it puts the land up for sale in order to clear the SRUC's debts.

In our opinion, these management decisions, which have been ***hiding in plain sight***, to strip the assets from Elmwood College and implement a ***Managed Decline*** approach, have been taken with the full knowledge that such an approach could make Elmwood College unsustainable.

In 2016, the Educational Institute for Scotland wrote to the SRUC Board of Governors and warned that:

***The land disposal programme undermines staff confidence and does not seem strategically aligned with the rural consultancy, education and research needs of the Institution and in the case of Elmwood leaves it potentially unsustainable***

It is concerning to note that the stripping of the assets at Elmwood College commenced as early as 2016 with the sale of the farm at Cupar and continues to this day. Yet, in 2018 the SRUC was sufficiently confident of its financial position that it 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 on-going changes at Elmwood came as a surprise to many.

Also, in our opinion, there will have been multiple opportunities since 2016 when the number of courses and students at Elmwood College was reduced, for the SRUC to avoid a financial deficit and maintain the buildings in a good condition by being creative and innovative and inviting other organisations onto the site to make use of the two main buildings they have now closed down and generate an additional income for Elmwood College.

We believe that the staff and students at Elmwood College have been poorly served by the SRUC. There are tremendous opportunities for the land-based sector with multiple environmental crises looming large. Managing farms, forests and golf courses requires skills and manpower, yet at every turn, Elmwood College students and staff would seem to have been stymied by the SRUC actions.

It seems that instead of being championed, it looks as if Elmwood College is being dismantled, and assets stripped and sold to create a slush fund to deal with the debt which we believe has mainly been accrued by the other sites elsewhere in Scotland. If this is the SRUC's definition of fairness, it is not one that we recognise, as the message being sent to the young people in this area would seem to be – ***look elsewhere for your education.***

It really shouldn't be this way. We are of the opinion therefore that Elmwood College should not have to pay the price for what we believe are the results of the poor management decisions taken by the SRUC Board over the years. We think that the SRUC has a moral duty to treat the Elmwood College site in the same ethical way that it is treating the other sites across Scotland.

## **The Way Forward**

What we need at Elmwood College is **Vision and Real Leadership**. The **managed decline** approach needs to be reversed, and every effort made to ensure that Elmwood College becomes and remains a vital source of regional land-based education and training. The Animal Care unit should be retained at Elmwood College.

### **a) Funding**

Funding should be sought from the Scottish Education Fund to repair the roof of the Animal Care Unit and for the purchase of solar panels to be placed on the roof of the unit to reduce the electricity bills for the unit by 92%. In addition, new funding should be sought to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Animal Care Unit so that students can learn close to home.

### **b) A new Vision should be created for Elmwood College**

A new vision should be created for Elmwood College which ensures that it becomes once more the vital and vibrant Further Education hub that it was before the merger with the other 3 colleges. This could be achieved through a new management approach supported by the co-option of key local stakeholders onto the board of the SRUC and the recruitment of a local manager to create and implement a new vision for Elmwood College which will ensure its long-term sustainability in this region.

**Dr Angela Anderson: Chair Elie & Earlsferry Community Council/retired Senior Medical Officer (Scottish Government)/Consultant in Public Health Medicine**

**Carol Birrell: Elie & Earlsferry Community Council**

**Kirstie Barclay: Elie & Earlsferry Community Council**

**17 April 2025**

