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## West Lothian Council

### ***'A Changing Landscape for Tertiary Education and Research in Scotland' –***

#### **Consultation on the proposed merger of the Scottish Further Education Funding Council and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council**

##### **1. Brief summary of the consultation paper**

This consultation paper suggests a merging of the Funding Councils for Further and Higher Education.

The principle component that will affect local government is within Section 18 of the draft bill which states that the new body would be required to consult, when appropriate, with various bodies including local authorities. It is also proposed to give councils a duty to provide the new body with such information as they may require in discharging their duty to provide adequate and efficient tertiary education, and address the skill needs of Scotland.

Also stated in the draft bill is a proposal to establish 'specified tertiary education providers'. Initially, these bodies will be the current further and higher education institutions presently in place. However, in time it is possible that Scottish Ministers may specify other providers for the purpose of funding provision for lifelong learning.

The proposals are seen to be a vital part of the work of the Executive to achieve greater, strategic coordination and coherence within tertiary education in Scotland that is fit to both face the challenges of our age, strong enough to drive the economic success upon which the country's prosperity depends and also provide flexibility to address local needs. The proposed new body will therefore seek to provide a single overview of further and higher education and seeks to maximise the benefit of an overview of all current, discrete sectors in providing a range of experience which will allow an effective decision-making process. This will link the objectives of post-school education and Scotland's national economic objectives.

The consultation paper does not ask any specific questions other than a suggested name for the new body and suggestions as to how a transitional pattern, between the current arrangements and the proposed future arrangements, should be prepared.

##### **2. West Lothian Council's general views on the consultation paper**

West Lothian Council welcomes this consultation as an opportunity for further education and higher education institutions to secure quality and parity of lifelong learning opportunities for everyone. West Lothian Council recognises that both further and higher education sectors in Scotland make an enormous contribution to our economy. This includes their role in developing academic skills, promoting vocational training and assisting individuals both to return and to continue with the concept of lifelong learning. The role of these institutions in carrying out research plays a critical role in promoting national wealth. The autonomy of universities and colleges should be protected, since autonomous institutions are best placed to respond quickly and effectively to the changing needs of students and employers.

We welcome the review and hope that it will ensure the development of an organisation which will support a more flexible, transparent funding system and ultimately bring better results in the delivery of national and local priorities.

West Lothian Council would support the title 'Tertiary Education Funding Council' as the name of this new organisation.

West Lothian Council would see within the proposal to create a single Funding Council opportunities to promote:

- Creative partnerships between institutions
- The planning and delivery of lifelong learning provision which meets the needs of employers, learners and communities
- Efficient use of resources across the sectors to deliver national and local priorities
- The relevance of learning to life and employment opportunities
- The needs of learners and employers in terms of the flexibility, responsiveness and accessibility of provision
- Funding arrangements for colleges, which are sustainable and realistic.

The proposals would allow West Lothian schools, in partnership with local colleges and further/higher institutions, to continue their work in seeking to address specific local needs in terms of a greater range of vocational training opportunities, e.g engineering and technology.

We would propose that a move from funding by grants to contracts with a greater degree of specification would be most welcome. The new funding body must recognise and reward the central role that colleges play in delivering both further and higher education to a wide range of students and by doing so will actively encourage processes leading to social inclusion.

### **3. Specific issues relating to the consultation paper**

West Lothian Council believes that the merger of higher and further education councils for Scotland will actively promote national economic development and social justice. To bring this about we would expect that the Funding Council would encourage further education institutions to build upon the already valuable work that they presently carry out within the context of local corporate planning and specifically within Community Planning Partnership arrangements. West Lothian Council would hope that the new body would provide funding for structures set up by CPPs to address identified local priority issues which FE institutions are currently unable to deal with due to constraining funding arrangements. An example would be rapidly building capacity to deliver a wide range of vocational courses following the identification of needs within the local community.

The new Funding Council should take into account the requirements of both learners and employers in the further provision of pre-16 vocational training. This is currently not adequately funded and further provision would undoubtedly improve the opportunities for learners and aid them in making informed choices. The objective should therefore be to provide a progressive, comprehensive and seamless progression for learners.

The consultation paper emphasises the importance of the partnership role. West Lothian Council supports such a view and it is important that bodies such as Careers Scotland, Futureskills Scotland and learndirect scotland maintain a key role in the process of individuals making informed choices about their future. The proposed new body offering an oversight of provision across the tertiary sector would be important in ensuring that these multiple organisations have shared objectives based upon the needs of the individual learners and the needs of their communities.

The consultation paper also makes the proposal that the requirement for education provided by FE institutions to be 'adequate and efficient' should be extended to higher education institutions. Whereas this is welcomed by West Lothian Council it is not clear from the proposal who will set and measure what is adequate and what is efficient. It will also have to be clarified as to who will have the responsibility to rectify any inefficiencies and inadequacies. West Lothian Council believes that local planning is of great importance in determining the nature and extent of appropriate skills for the future workforce. The outcome of this local planning should be taken into

account when determining what is adequate and efficient in the provision of education in meeting those needs.

West Lothian Council hopes that the creation of a Joint Funding Council will bring about a greater focus on the issue of relevance of skills, both academic and vocational, to the world of work. This is not just an issue for business, but also for those young people leaving schools, colleges and university to enter the job market.

West Lothian Council supports the consultation paper's view that new and innovative approaches as to how the sectors of education will work together should be considered and put in place. In this we would include school age education and the way in which this relates to the FE and HE sectors. The use of the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework, even though it is still in its infancy, can prove to be an effective tool in making the qualification structure and the links between the education institutions better understood by students and employers.

#### **4. Suggested further opportunities to develop tertiary education in Scotland within the context of these proposals**

In our recent response to the school/college review consultation paper we questioned whether the current powers of FE Colleges to engage with various age groups of school pupils should be altered. This consultation paper appears to raise a similar issue when it questions whether there should be some form of statutory duty on incorporated colleges (and education authorities) to encourage school/college collaboration. If the Scottish Further Education Funding Council, and ultimately the new body, remains the principal source of funding for school enrolments in FE it is critical that the importance of school/college collaboration and the exchange possibilities for students should be recognised. Current funding arrangements mitigate against the seamless, meaningful transfer of students from one establishment to another. It is of critical importance that these points be taken into account at this stage.

The continuing expectation to achieve parity of esteem between academic and vocational courses for Scottish school pupils under Higher Still arrangements cannot be achieved without a greater clarity of purpose about vocational education in Scottish schools. It is important that the Scottish Executive gives clear advice regarding the status of vocational training and how this relates to a desire to encourage more young people to attend Higher Education courses.

There is most certainly a capacity issue regarding the very significant under-investment in college buildings and facilities which constrain colleges in their drive to fully develop school / college vocational education opportunities. Further Education Colleges are essentially set up for post 16 students. The colleges are not funded to accept larger numbers of pupils under the age of 16. This as stated earlier mitigates against a progressive meaningful experience for the learner.

The Funding Councils should through partnership strongly encourage the specific development of vocational education courses and awards to ensure more assured pathways of progression for pupils into the world of work. It is important that in the development of vocational courses there should be strong partnership arrangements. This is not currently always the case and the proposal to have an overseeing tertiary body provides the opportunity to ensure that all work towards similar objectives.

The development of Scottish Progression Awards are an important feature of this consultation but secondary headteachers and their staff will require more detailed information and staff development regarding vocational courses and qualifications, and the way in which they link to school provision. Effective implementation of Scottish Progression Awards, particularly where it involves pupils under statutory school leaving age attending college, or being taught in appropriate vocational settings, cannot be met from existing school and college budgets.

The proposals must be based upon an entitlement for students to access all forms of education post-statutory school leaving age, whether this be vocational education or higher education opportunities. This provision must reflect the varying interests, aspirations and potential of all learners and this is an issue which will require significant discussion particularly in relation to the costs of such programmes. The use of e-learning/web-based learning to meet the learning needs of all students should be considered as a specific action point within this review.

An important issue which will have to be considered as a component of this review we believe is that concerning the professional training and qualifications of FE staff to ensure that the levels of teaching skills and methodologies are adequate to reflect the wide range of needs of students of all abilities post-school. Very significant changes have been made in the ways in which West Lothian schools have been staffed post-McCrone to ensure that the focus is continuously on teaching and learning. We would suggest that similar approaches be made within the FE sector to ensure that teaching and learning methodologies are the focus of the process within FE, and indeed, Higher Education.

## **5. Transitional Arrangements**

It is surprising that the consultation paper and the draft Bill which accompanies it has made no firm proposals for the critical transitional arrangements which will be necessary. It is important that provisions are put in place which will ensure a smooth transition and avoid destabilising the sectors. Within this process it is of paramount importance that the needs of our young people are taken into account in these transitional arrangements to ensure that work initially with existing Councils and ultimately with the new body will all be dedicated towards serving the needs of these young people. Robust plans must be put in place to ensure that this occurs.

It is suggested that a working party should be formed to ensure that such a robust plan is created. Representation should be from:

- Scottish Local Authorities
- Governing body of any Higher and Further Education Institution
- Scottish Qualification Authority
- Scottish Enterprise
- Careers Scotland and FutureSkills Scotland
- Trade Unions
- CBI

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