

Our Ref: RH/JK/May 2023

12 May 2023

Sue Webber MSP  
The Convenor of Education, Children and Young People Committee

Dear Ms Webber,

I am writing to protest the sudden withdrawal of the Scottish Government's Transition Fund for colleges which had been intended to support the sector adapt to the real-terms decline in funding. The sudden withdrawal of this relatively small pot of money, £26m for the whole sector, will have a disproportionate impact on Newbattle Abbey College and other colleges across the country.

The college sector's funding has been in decline for some years and the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) Chief Executive has been very clear that the sector can expect 'flat cash' annual allocations for some years to come, as a best case scenario. The SFC has discussed with the College Principals' Group for several months the measures, or 'flexibilities', it would apply to enable the sector to adjust. These included a reduction in activity targets and a one-of transition fund of £26m to help colleges adjust to the new operating environment. The funding allocations for 2023-24 announced by SFC in April confirmed flat-cash funding (again) with a 10% reduction in activity (ie student places). This has forced colleges into drastic measures as they seek to cut courses and make staff redundant in order to maintain financial sustainability.

The transition fund offered some small consolation in the shape of a modest investment to help cash-strapped colleges manage their way through the financial pressures. The sudden and completely unexpected withdrawal of this fund feels, quite frankly, like a kick when we are already down.

Newbattle Abbey College is a small, specialist institution with a mission to support those who have missed out on further education the first time around or who find the traditional educational system does not work for them. Our students are precisely those people who this Government says it wishes to prioritise in order to create a more equitable society. Within a small student cohort, we have the highest proportion of care experienced students in the country. We are proud of the fact that, thanks to our specialist support and teaching almost all of our graduating students, irrespective of their background, go on to thrive in further and higher education or employment.

**Newbattle Abbey College**  
Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 3LL  
Tel: 0131 663 1921  
Email: [office@nac.ac.uk](mailto:office@nac.ac.uk)  
[www.newbattleabbeycollege.ac.uk](http://www.newbattleabbeycollege.ac.uk)  
Principal: Roddy Henry

The flat-cash funding at a time of massive cost increases means that, as a small college with little flexibility, we have no option but to narrow our provision and reduce our staffing. That is a tragedy, not least for our dedicated staff who work tirelessly to nurture and support our students.

I fully appreciate that public funds are under severe pressure. We already supplement the SFC teaching grant, which accounts for around 55% of our income, with a range of income generating activities. The revenue from all of these activities goes to supporting our students and our education provision that has national reach, such as the Adult Achievement Awards and the Forest and Outdoor Learning Awards. We are committed to growing this income in response to the pressure on public funding. We do and will take full responsibility for our own financial future. The £26m transition fund was an opportunity to invest for the future and help us deal with the financial pressures. Our share would have been necessarily small but, for an institution of our size, character and creativity, it could have been significant in helping us build and grow.

I urge you to bring whatever influence you can to bear in order to ensure that Newbattle Abbey College and colleges across Scotland receive sufficient funds to do what the Government has asked of us – continue to educate and train the people of Scotland in a more financially sustainable way.

I have sent a similar letter to our MSP and to Lothian regional MSPs. The Chair of our Board of Directors has written, on behalf of the Board, to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. Our students have initiated a petition to protest the cuts to further and higher education and the impact on staff and students.

Regards

Roddy Henry  
Principal and Chief Executive

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