

# Save Elmwood submission of 7 January 2026

This submission comprises:

- Save Elmwood briefing paper, dated 28 November 2025
- Email to Willie Rennie, dated 24 December 2025
- A proposal for a New Vision and Strategy for the SRUC - to address the failure of the merger of Oatridge, Elmwood, Barony and the SAC colleges, dated 7 January 2026

## Save Elmwood Briefing Paper, dated 28 November 2025

Save Elmwood is part of a group of individuals and organisations in the local community campaigning around SRUC's Elmwood Campus in Cupar, representing community concerns about its closure and sale and advocating for its retention as a facility for further education for the community.

The college has delivered education to the community since 1953, once employing more than 380 staff and supporting around 5,300 learners in a range of settings across Fife – **75% of the students came from Fife**. Given the rural context of this area, localised provision was and still is essential. Our area suffers from exceptionally high rates of family/child poverty (double the national and Fife averages) and a high cost of living.

However, following the merger of all 4 colleges – Barony, Elmwood, Oatridge and the Scottish Agricultural College – to form SRUC in 2012, there was a growing concern within the local community that the **SRUC was not a good steward of the community assets** it received in the regionalisation reforms. The perception was of managed decline, lack of local leadership and missed opportunities to make the most of Elmwood's strategic position both economically and reputationally. By 2016, Auchincruive Campus in Ayr was being sold off along with Elmwood's farm and buildings, and at the same time the Rural Affairs Committee was corresponding with the SRUC about its own concerns.

SRUC's focus continued to narrow significantly, moving away from the original objectives of its founding Further Education (FE) colleges to prioritise learning in agriculture, land and the rural sector. FE Courses were cut in favour of Higher Education (HE) courses. We believe this was because SRUC speculated that this would generate greater income and higher institutional status. With the focus turning to two sites in Edinburgh and Aberdeen, **the future was a new Vet School**. This immediately raised questions over need as the established Glasgow and Edinburgh Vet Schools were not at capacity. In this headlong rush to achieve university status, we believe the SRUC accepted PhD students onto courses at their Edinburgh campus 3 years ago when they had **no power to award final degrees** until October 2024 – potentially catastrophic for the students. Similarly, vet students are currently in place **without SRUC having accreditation from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons**, nor having procured the “distributed model of clinical training

involving a country-wide network of partner practices" as referred to in its 2024 Financial Report.

By April 2025, the SRUC had closed the main building and accommodation at Elmwood campus and most courses, staff and students were gone. Students from the closed Animal Care Unit (ACU) are **now being taken by bus across Scotland to other sites** and those who have been unable to do this for family or other reasons, have had to give up their course. It is our understanding that many of Elmwood's assets have been stripped and sent to the new Craibstone veterinary facility in Aberdeen. By June 2025, the SRUC Board had approved building two "capital works" (small animal and ruminant facilities) in the same meeting as they **approve in principle a banking facility** and just two months after closing Elmwood's ACU – which had received investment of £350,000 in 2019; and despite June 2024 minutes quoting that capital spend had been paused by the CEO.

During a Participation Request to SRUC by Elie & Earlsferry Community Council in 2024 (cut short by SRUC), it was noted that a Board Member claimed that the money obtained from the sale of the golf course, the sale of the agricultural land and the sale of the site at Cupar to a Housing Developer will be used to rescue the SRUC from its debt which had risen from £6m to £8m. SRUC's last reported finances up to 31 March 2024 show a **deficit of £10.8million**, the deficit having doubled during 2024. SRUC is currently in the middle of a three-year Financial Recovery Plan. A FOI request confirmed SRUC use a centralised treasury – we see Elmwood's sale as a **loss to our community to the benefit of communities elsewhere and to SRUC's financial recovery**.

Our group has approached Scottish Government, Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Education Committee, OSCR, Audit Scotland and politicians with our concerns:

- a Good Governance Institute report of SRUC in 2023 questioned a "tendency for independent members of the board to adopt executive perspectives";
- SRUC's 2024 Financial Report "identified the risk of management override of controls";
- a 97% EIS staff vote of no confidence in SRUC management in May 2025;
- MSP Willie Rennie asked SRUC (SC007312) to publish governance records in June 2025 – this has been slow and little, with FOI requests now being appealed;
- SRUC's Financial Recovery Board includes no non-executive members;
- attempts to contact the SRUC Interim Chair confirmed the only contact is by an email monitored by the executive office = no route of contact independent of management.

But responses were unanimous: universities are autonomous organisations with responsibility for their own decisions and finances. By June 2025, SRUC Board Meeting Minutes quote the "**Chair's goals and Principal's goals were difficult to reconcile**" – the Chair then stepped down at the start of August 2025. Dundee University had similar issues.

We have not yet found where any accountability might lie. The SFC appoint an **Accountable Officer** – for SRUC this is the Principal/CEO, who we believe has no finance background; his reported salary in 2024 was £264,000 (more than head of

Police Scotland). In response to our concern about the closure of the main campus at Elmwood, the SFC CEO responded:

*SRUC had advised the Scottish Funding Council that while most students in Animal Care courses find employment, much of this is in lower-paid, part-time roles, and progression into professional posts, such as veterinary nursing, is low. These outcomes are part of the context SRUC considers when making decisions about curriculum and estates planning.*

In our opinion, this is a **biased and incorrect view of FE provision**.

James Withers proposed in his report to the government in 2023 that colleges and FE courses should be given equal status with universities and HE courses:

*There needs to be a shared acknowledgement that different pathways are simply different: not better, not worse, just different. In other words, and to be blunt, I want to consign to the dustbin the outdated view that studying at university is somehow a “better” kind of success.*

*National policy should recognise that skills are not an alternative to education, but an essential product of learning and training, and give equal value to the various settings and pathways in and through which skills development can occur.*

We therefore call on the Scottish Government and the SFC to address these matters and ensure continued provision of both FE and HE land-based courses across Scotland. There is also a need for **much clearer oversight of the activities and governance** of universities and colleges and the longer-term implications of their strategic decisions. Based on SRUC past pledges to keep the sites accessible and offer a good geographical spread, the SFC has the power to **place conditions on further SRUC funding**, based on provision of courses and quality of provision at all sites. Sufficient funding should be made available to convert Elmwood Campus into a community and educational hub with reinstatement of the ACU and associated FE courses.

Much of SRUC's income is from public funds; its accounting year changed in 2024, leaving a likely two-year gap in reporting by 2026. In the 2024 Financial Statement the CEO and Chair signed off the “on-going process for identifying, evaluating and managing the SRUC's significant risks” However, just a few weeks later in March 2025, Board Meeting minutes state a “need for the CEO and Executive to encourage and monitor compliance and **ensure internal control systems are working effectively**”. The banking facility is approved in principle in June 2025. We are of the opinion that the similarities to Dundee University's fate are there in plain sight, we therefore question:

- is there sufficient independent oversight of SRUC's executive leadership decisions?
- does SRUC's Board scrutinise decisions thoroughly enough and is it given enough opportunity to do so?
- will SRUC's focus on HE, its Vet School and the main school sites in Edinburgh (courtesy of Edinburgh University) and Aberdeen (juggling a

bypass and housing development), with pressure from the domicile student cap and negligible international students, improve its financial reality?

**What happens if SRUC, in its tunnel vision for the Vet School, does not recover financially?**

## Email from Save Elmwood campaign to Willie Rennie MSP, dated 24 December 2025

**Subject:** SRUC and a New Vision for Elmwood

Dear Willie

We note that you have been seeking a new vision from SRUC for Elmwood. Attached is a link to Askham Bryan Agricultural College in Yorkshire. The Land-based college offers a large choice of further education courses and apprenticeship options for school leavers, 16-19-year-olds and adults who are looking to continue their education after their GCSEs:

<https://www.askham-bryan.ac.uk/>

Students can enter via the bespoke Entry Level Programmes which are for anyone with no formal qualifications who wants to progress in life and work in a vocational area. They welcome applications from students who need more support or have learning difficulties or disabilities and/or an Educational Health Care Plan. Students with GCSE qualifications who are looking to start a career for example in Animal Care or Environmental Conservation where the focus is on gaining the knowledge and skills to work with animals or work in the countryside and a conservation setting, study tree and woodland management or horticulture can enter at Level 2 or Level 3.

The University Centre in Askham Bryan specialises in land-based higher education. It offers a range of FdSc courses including agriculture, equine science and management and veterinary nursing. The BSc and BSc Hons program integrates knowledge and skills that can be applied to a wide range of areas within the land-based industry. We believe this comprehensive and inclusive approach to education far surpasses the approach taken by SRUC which would seem to favour higher education and university degree on-line provision to the exclusion of further education and skills acquisition. We believe this old fashioned and restrictive approach to education is flawed and should be binned (James Withers Report on the post school learning system 2023) as it will effectively exclude the 43% of school leavers in Scotland, who have been assessed as having additional support needs, but who with access to the correct support and entry level courses such the Intro, NC, HNC and HND courses can flourish and go on to have a rewarding career.

A new report from Sir Anton Muscatelli, a leading economist and a longtime university principal outlined a detailed roadmap for stronger growth and economic sustainability in Scotland, with colleges and universities identified as key drivers. He argued that Scotland's economic future hinges on its colleges and universities and that economic expansion is now a "national priority" and has become essential to raising the standard of living and protecting public services in the years to come. While universities are described as driving innovation, Scotland's colleges are typically referred to as the "skills engines" of the economy and vital sources for training in future green jobs and other emerging industries. The Muscatelli report identifies colleges as crucial resources for both training new workers and upskilling

existing employees, both of which he said will be important for recruiting and training the estimated 1.1 million workers Scotland will need in the next decade.

If adopted, we believe that the model offered by Askham Bryan College would go a long way to addressing the needs of the land-based industry in Scotland and provide training and upskilling both the new workers and existing employees identified in the Muscatelli report. It would enable a viable long-term provision of both FE and HE across the SRUC sites and put a stop to the continuing erosion of FE provision across the Scottish landscape which has resulted in a hollowed-out shell at Elmwood campus in Cupar and animal care courses across the country now being shut down as provision is centralised in Aberdeen.

Without the implementation of an inclusive model such as that delivered by Askham Bryan college, we are of the belief that the merger of Oatridge, Barony, the Scottish Agricultural college and Elmwood has failed. This potential failure was predicted in 2016 by the Education Institute for Scotland, but little has changed since then with the SRUC focussing on obtaining University status, removing FE courses and placing all university courses on-line. Also, it would seem that the main financial focus has been on the provision of a vet school in Aberdeen where over 64% of the revenue generated will only provide benefit to Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. With this approach it would seem that large numbers of school leavers will be left behind.

We therefore propose that consideration be given to a significant change of direction by the executive and senior management team at SRUC and that the Save Elmwood group and other key local stakeholders are involved in creating a totally different and more inclusive vision for the SRUC and Elmwood.

Also, we feel it would be really helpful if we could meet up with you at the start of the new year to discuss how we can navigate the future for the land at Elmwood.

Angela Anderson

Hilary Lumsdem

Save Elmwood

24 December 2025

# **Proposal for a New Vision and Strategy for the SRUC - to address the failure of the merger of Oatridge, Elmwood, Barony and the SAC colleges, dated 7 January 2026**

## **1. Merger of SAC, Oatridge, Elmwood and Barony**

The main aim of the merger of the 4 colleges Oatridge, Elmwood, Barony and Scottish Agricultural College in 2012 was to deliver education and training for the land-based sector across Scotland and enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of that delivery. Learners were to have a full range of skills training, education, research and business support available to them. The model was to be similar in terms of Quality Assurance and Education to that of UHI and its partner colleges.

It was of key concern to local stakeholders that local access to skills, training and learning across the regions in which the colleges are based, should not be lost in the process. Regarding aquaculture and forestry, with an ageing workforce it was important to attract well motivated new entrants who could gain qualifications and progress to resolve a looming demographic crisis in the workforce. Similarly, continuing training and refreshing of knowledge was needed to meet the needs of animal health and welfare.

There were to be flexible entry and exit points to learning with a comprehensive range of learning opportunities. The supply of land-based land-use education provision in Scotland was to meet the needs of the economy, learners, the labour market and employers with an unwavering focus on the needs of the learners and improving retention rates in colleges in such a way that this would not result in screening out applicants who might be considered to compromise their ambitions for improved retention i.e. those with learning difficulties. There should be a guarantee of "**Opportunities for All**" 16–19-year-olds. Skills development, bespoke training and education opportunities that are already highly regarded were to continue to be offered.

Whether attending a course of night classes or completing a PhD, the new organisation was intended to create opportunities for students to learn with the best possible resources, with excellent facilities and learning environments. Learners should also feel valued and their views encouraged and respected.

## **2. Failure to deliver the vision**

We believe these aims and objectives have not been achieved. Instead of building on the excellent educational provision at each of the 4 colleges, the SRUC through their slash and sell strategy has done the opposite. As far back as 2016, the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS) flagged up that "the SRUC land disposal programme seems random and not strategically thought out, with what appears to be asset stripping of the three former Further Education land-based colleges, which leaves these campuses in a weaker position and in the case of Elmwood potentially unsustainable. It also voiced the concern that the centralised nature of the SRUC is causing harm to the SRUC as a whole and especially to those parts of the organisation outside King's Buildings in Edinburgh". It advised that if the Elmwood campus is forced to close then the SRUC merger will be deemed to have been a failure, resulting in a FE college being effectively closed and its reserves and funding being sucked into the SRUC to Fife's detriment.

## 2.1 Bad decisions and poor financial management

Based on the evidence that we have, we believe that bad decisions and poor financial management have left the Scottish Rural College (SRUC) in a dire state close to that of Dundee University, but with the added risk of a negative impact on the land-based workforce and Further Education (FE) provision throughout Scotland and a significant risk to Elmwood College in Cupar, Fife.

Between 2015–2019 the SRUC sold 88 assets consisting of swathes of land and property throughout its campuses in Aberdeen, Ayr, Dumfriesshire, Edinburgh, Fife and Inverness. It sold off Auchincruive Campus, which had a price tag of £1.25m. John Scott, Conservative MSP for Ayr and a farmer commented:

***'Auchincruive was sold off because it was an asset that could easily be sold off ... to pay off debts created elsewhere.'***

The SRUC has recently ploughed millions of pounds into creating a new vet college at Aberdeen, over £20m in building costs alone, in spite of the fact it is in debt and that over 64% of any revenue generated will solely benefit Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. An animal care facility will also require to be funded and built at Aberdeen before the vet school can be accredited. The SRUC also identified concerns that vet students tend to be female and leave 3-4 years after qualifying.

## 2.2 Surgical cuts at Elmwood College

The erosion of the breadth of the curriculum at Elmwood College has continued at pace. The farm at Cupar was sold off with the loss of FE courses. The student accommodation was closed down and the main building shut a year later, resulting in the loss of the laboratory, the main teaching facility and the café. The buildings were left to deteriorate. We believe the intention was then for the buildings to be demolished and the land sold to a housing developer to pay off the SRUC debts accrued elsewhere. Students were crammed into the one remaining building which has an insufficient number of rooms available for teaching and students had to wash their cups and mugs in the toilet sink. The Elmwood students held protest meetings outside Elmwood against the closure of the Animal Care Unit (ACU) as they felt their views hadn't been taken into account. Once the ACU was shut down, the students were then bussed from Fife to Oatridge in West Lothian. Those who were unable to do this because of family or other reasons, lost out on any further teaching and watched as their dream of working in the animal care sector was crushed.

The students were also forced to protest when the SRUC attempted to prevent the annual graduation ceremony. None of this fits in with the original vision for the new organisation:

***"to create opportunities for students to learn with the best possible resources, with excellent facilities and learning environments".***

The Golf Course at Cupar was put up for sale. Whilst the original sale fell through, the majority of FE courses on golf course management and greenkeeping have since then been shut down. NC Greenkeeping, which delivered the practical elements for greenkeeping, was the only full-time entry-level curriculum available in Scotland for the greenkeeping industry. The staff were not told about this as a team

but instead found out via Facebook. HNC and HND Golf Course management full time courses were dropped in September 2022 when the decision was taken to only run them as a distance learning course. This is a popular method of learning for those already working in industry but meant there was no full-time course available once a full-time NC student had completed their studies. It is our belief that these courses were shut down to enable disposal of the golf course.

Yet Fife and Scotland have a history steeped in Golf. There are at the present time, 44 Golf courses in Fife and 550 Golf courses in Scotland with many of the most famous courses found on the East and West coast of Scotland which could provide future employment for students with Green Keeping and Golf Course Management skills.

The St Andrews Links Trust voiced their concern at their Information Evening in September 2025 that there are no or few greenkeeping courses in Scotland and the demand for green keepers is rising as there are more golf courses opening. They had spoken to Elmwood about jointly managing such a course, but their offer was refused by the SRUC board.

Whilst the SRUC recently advised that they will be introducing a BSc course in greenkeeping and golf course management at Elmwood this course is to be provided on-line. Are the students going to learn how to drive the large pieces of machinery needed to manage a golf course at the Elmwood golf course in Cupar or is this going to be an Elmwood BSc course in name only, with the students being placed elsewhere to study greenkeeping and golf course management? It would seem that this is the case, as the SRUC Board is now of the opinion that it would be preferable if the golf course were to be sold as a going concern, as it was not required for any current golf course management courses and should the golf course be sold it would not negatively impact the learning or teaching experience.

### **2.3 Lack of involvement of key stakeholders in decisions taken**

It would also seem that planning is still being done at arm's length and behind closed doors, without engaging the knowledge base found amongst the staff at the colleges and campuses. The recent decision to close the Animal Care Unit at Elmwood College took place at an SRUC Board meeting in December 2024, behind closed doors with the agenda item being marked as **confidential**.

Following this meeting, a consultation exercise was undertaken with staff and students. However, we feel this was a **tick the box exercise** as no key stakeholders such as our community group were involved and the decision had already been taken in December by the SRUC Board to close the unit. We have subsequently found out that the Animal Care Unit (ACU) at Elmwood which was an excellent sector leading facility was closed down as the SRUC was of the opinion that the animal care FE students would only end up in part-time poorly paid jobs.

This goes against the Merger Proposal Document which set out that the merger of the Scottish Agricultural College, Barony, Oatridge and Elmwood Colleges would provide greater access to knowledge, bring coherence to the delivery of tertiary education and training for the land-based sector in Scotland, create opportunities for

increased provision and build on the four partners' commitment to learners and enhance quality and learning.

Also, with the SRUC, which has now obtained University status, choosing to focus on academic undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses while moving to distance/online learning (or 'micro-credentials', which US studies show aren't suited to vocational students who require hands-on training) and as it scales down its HNC/HND offerings at all its sites across Scotland and places all courses on-line, in 5–10 years' time, with fewer young workers or returners able to join the land-based workforce via an HNC/HND course – which gives students real-world practical skills and analytical abilities to deal with real-world situations – Scotland will struggle to build a multi-generational workforce required to support the range of different industries that use land to produce food and renewable resources.

#### **2.4. Concerns and the need to act**

There seems to be a contradiction between what has been said by the SRUC in relation to Elmwood College and what has actually happened. The focus would in fact seem to have been on selling off the bricks and mortar and other assets as opposed to focussing on the students and their needs.

In our opinion, these management decisions which have been hiding in plain sight to strip and sell 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.

Our concerns led us to contact OSCR with a request for an inquiry into SRUC activities as it is our understanding that it is not generally legal for a charity to deplete the resources of one charity entity to shore up another even if they are related. We also requested the Parliamentary Education Committee carry out an inquiry into the governance arrangements of the SRUC.

A staff vote conducted by the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland's largest teaching Union, returned a 97% vote of no confidence in SRUC's leadership, alongside a public student statement condemning the Elmwood Animal Care Unit closure. We have also now requested an investigation be held by the Education committee into the SRUC's actions.

## Conclusion

**A new Vision and Strategy is required along with a new senior management team to take the vision forward.**

In order to deal with all the issues which have been identified:

- failure to maintain the existing level of services.
- failure to maintain the quality of the student experience.
- failure to ensure local access to skills, training and learning across the regions in which the colleges are based,
- failure to manage financial stability (the SRUC is currently over £10m in debt).
- failure to maintain effective communication with key stakeholders such as Elie & Earlsferry Community Council (their Participation Request Outcome Improvement Process (OIP) was shut down following a 2-hour workshop – an OIP usually takes between 12-18 months to complete)

and to help meet the aims and objectives originally set out in the 2012 merger document we propose that a new vision and strategy are created for both Elmwood College which we believe has suffered so badly under the current **managed decline** and **slash and sell regime** and the other colleges which have also been negatively impacted.

We have however been advised that the SRUC board has already created a strategy which has been signed off by the board. Key stakeholders may be able to comment on it in February or March. We feel this is totally unacceptable. If the SRUC is to move away from the destructive **slash and sell** approach and the cutting back on FE provision favoured by the current SRUC management and the resulting chaos, key stakeholders including representatives of the Save Elmwood campaign group, students and staff should be involved at the start of the process of creating a new strategy. We therefore call on the SRUC board to actively involve all key stakeholders from this day forth in the creation of a new vision and strategy for the SRUC.

We are also of the opinion that a new senior management team should take forward the work of the SRUC. The model should be based on that of the UHI. There should be a Management Board in each of the SRUC institutions with a key leader from each of the 3 colleges and one from the SRUC forming the SRUC senior management team – as was agreed in the original merger.

Whilst the UHi is currently undergoing a transformation program, one of the seven principles to enable change that UHI has committed to, is ensuring that they remain geographically dispersed and take a locally led approach. They also intend that any changes made will be done ensuring that more money and resources are released to support the student experience.

With their Locally led approach the UHI aims to ensure local accountability and empowerment and place-based approaches that underpin UHI with coherence and responsiveness across their regions. The UHI is currently working with the Funding Council to access funding for the Transformation program.

In our opinion, the SRUC has failed to mitigate the risks put forward in the matrix of the original merger. A fresh new management team with a clear strategy backed by business and finance experience could lead a Transformation program providing similar benefits to those sought by the UHI. This would ensure the delivery of the original vision to lead Scotland's land-based learning and the sector's linked commercial opportunities and ensure a skilled workforce that supports its land-based security and sustainability through the equal provision of both FE practical hands-on vocational skills courses and HE undergraduate and post-graduate courses on a regional basis across the SRUC sites in Scotland.

Dr Angela Anderson: Chair Elie & Earlsferry Community Council

Hilary Lumsden: ex SAC student  
Save Elmwood

7 January 2026