

# UHI North, West and Hebrides – Anchor Institution Strategy

## A framework to support the Board’s estates decisions as an ‘anchor institution’

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## 1. Executive Summary

This report provides the Board with a structured, evidence-led framework for making high-stakes decisions on the future of UHI North, West and Hebrides' rural and island centres.

It brings together:

- the historic rationale and merger commitments underpinning the distributed estate,
- a definition of the college's role as an **anchor institution**,
- the policy and legislative requirements the Board must meet, and
- practical decision tools and matrices to guide estates rationalisation.

Key message: **the college's estate is not simply a cost base**. It is the visible infrastructure through which UHI NWH fulfils statutory and policy expectations around *place, equity, community wealth, and economic development*.

The Board must therefore weigh short-term financial pressures against:

- **Anchor value**: centres as enablers of equity, trust, and opportunity.
- **Compliance duties**: including ICIA, Equality, and Community Wealth Building requirements.
- **Strategic opportunity**: positioning centres to support regional transformation in skills, green energy and the just transition.

This framework is deliberately detailed so members can extract specific evidence for decisions, while ensuring no rural or island centre closure or redesign is made on financial grounds alone. It positions the Board to make transparent, compliant, and forward-looking choices that balance deficit recovery with long-term mission and impact.

## 2. Context and Introduction

UHI North, West and Hebrides serves a vast, sparsely populated geography of more than 12,000 square miles encompassing some of the most remote rural and islands parts of Scotland, the UK and Europe, including mainland peninsulas and multiple island chains.

Spatial distance from key services, including education, health, combined with lack of infrastructure, transport, connectivity and a high degree of fuel poverty, is a key barrier and disadvantage for people living in this area.

The development of a network of learning centres to enable access to post-school tertiary education and skills has characterized the development and purpose of all three legacy colleges:

to ensure people in the North, West and Hebrides had access to post-school learning within reasonable travel distance without the need to leave their homes or communities.

The resulting distributed model of learning, combined with early adoption of video conferencing and online learning, has characterized the development of the three legacy colleges for many decades, in parallel with the development of the University of the Highlands and Islands. (See: UHI - The Making of a University, G Hills, 2004)

### **3. How did the college end up with so many rural and island centres?**

#### **Origins in the creation of UHI**

From the 1990s onwards, the colleges that became part of UHI were pioneers of *distributed learning*. UHI was conceived as a federal, place-based university serving communities across the Highlands and Islands — not from a single campus, but through a network of local access points to tertiary education. The rural and island centres were deliberately established as “bridges” into higher and further education for people who could not relocate to Inverness, Perth, Aberdeen or Glasgow.

#### **Widening access and equity**

These centres embodied the principle that geography should not be a barrier to learning. They allowed learners in small, remote, and island communities to take part in FE and HE without leaving their families, employment, or communities. They addressed barriers of cost, distance, and culture (including Gaelic and island identity), creating a genuine equality of opportunity offer.

#### **Community anchor role**

Centres were designed to be shared community assets — not only classrooms, but also spaces for digital access, training, employer engagement, and cultural activity. The centres often acted as trusted hubs for local communities to engage with public services, enterprise support, and lifelong learning.

#### **Economic development and regeneration**

In line with successive government strategies for the Highlands and Islands, centres were seen as catalysts of local economic, social and cultural regeneration. By providing training aligned to local labour markets — from tourism to health & care, renewables, and maritime — the centres supported resilience in fragile communities.

### **4. UHI Founder Spirit**

At its heart, UHI was created as a “university of place”, not a traditional urban institution. The rural and island centres reflected that founding spirit: to *bring education to the learner* rather than *require the learner to move away to access post-school education*.

The centres remain a visible symbol of belonging and parity for communities that historically felt excluded from tertiary education. This is especially important given many communities are

challenged by rural poverty and depopulation of young and economically active people departing for cities.

## 5. Today's relevance and key challenge

While the college and its network of rural and island centres are under significant financial pressure, the rationale for the distributed centre model—equity, access, community anchoring, and opportunity—is still relevant.

The challenge now is not whether the college should serve rural and island communities, but how it can do so sustainably

## 6. Diseconomies of Scale and Rurality Funding

The distributed centre model contains inherent diseconomies of scale—this has always been recognized by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) through the provision of discrete rurality (remoteness) funding (only applicable to further education core funding, not higher education or work based learning). This fund was last formally reviewed by SFC in 2017/18, and the allocation to UHI has been flat cash since 2018/19.

The merged college receives currently £2.7M out of a total rurality fund of £5.4M for UHI. Using an inflation calculator ([SPICe](#)), this fund would now be worth over £7M in real terms for UHI, and over £3.5M for UHI NWH in 2025-26. Together with the unfunded Distant Island Allowance, this amounts to over £1M of a structural funding deficit linked to UHI NWH operating in the most fragile remote rural and island parts of Scotland and the UK, whilst seeking to deliver on both governments' desired economic and civic outcomes for those regions.

Careful thought needs to be given to retaining SFC's rurality funding at a time of further FE funding review: the three main campus locations in Thurso, Stornoway and Fort William are themselves 'remote rural' and separated from each other by more than 170 miles travel distance. However, whilst the current allocation method of rurality funding does not specify the number of rural and islands centres to be maintained, there is no guarantee that closing 16 centres out of 19 would not prompt a review of the college's rurality funding either by UHI or SFC.

## 7. Commitments made during merger

The merger business case ([UHI North, West and Hebrides](#)) for the three rural and islands colleges based its merger rationale on the college being an 'anchor institution' for the area through its 19 centre locations,

- connecting rural and island communities and learners, expanding curriculum and learning opportunities across the whole tertiary spectrum, particularly in recognized growth areas such as green energy and net zero, Gaelic, engineering and construction, health and social care and digital, to bring improved equality of opportunity to 'more learners, in more places' and support social, economic and cultural regeneration of communities in the most fragile areas of Scotland.

- positioning the use of online and digitally enabled learning to create the merged college as a ‘connected, flexible and distributed’ organization, improving access and consistency regardless of location, and to meet locally specific employment and training needs.
- Tying estates and investment plans to future growth and re-investment, creating capacity for new provision and research
- Generating mode opportunities for local communities and local businesses, many of whom a SME or micro-businesses through access to a local pipeline of skilled graduates and workforce upskilling

This all points to rural and island college centres as ‘anchor institutions’ – deliberately located within proximity of secondary schools to support attainment, raise aspirations and enable seamless transitions and progress from school to further and higher education or other career paths – to not just being places of transactional learning or mere attainment of qualifications, but tangible drivers of inclusion, economic growth, innovation and ‘community well-being’ deeply embedded in the fabric of local communities and linked to unique place-based opportunities.

The rural and island centres themselves are enablers of economic and social impact, providing~ # VCQ high value stable employment in fragile communities for a significant number of local A ``14567890-=people, as well as providing an accessible permanent local ‘face’ and entry point to UHI.

The centres were designed to provide access to the range of available online provision within the college, as well as the wider UHI, supporting learners with student support, personal and academic guidance, safe places to study, reliable connectivity and technology support, as well as enabling a local lifelong community of learning in response to local community development needs and workforce or training needs of local employers. Unlike the Open University which operates an almost exclusively online model, the centres are physical entities at the core of rural and island communities.

## **8. UHI NWH’s Estates Strategy and the need for a full centre review**

Over the last five years since 2020, utilisation patterns in all college centres were significantly influenced by COVID-19 and its aftermath; digital participation increased, footfall declined and has not recovered to pre-Covid levels, and many of the college’s rural and island centres appear underused. Meanwhile, college sector finances are under substantial pressure, with the college’s cost base subject of intense scrutiny to recover from significant operating deficit. As a result, the Board faces a dilemma of balancing commitments made about the mission of the college as an anchor institution placed deep within our communities through a distributed model of centres with the requirement to become financially sustainable.

In developing its second three-year recovery plan earlier in 2025, the college has reviewed the cost of its estate in detail, creating a full income and expenditure model for each of the 16 rural and island centres (outwith the three main campus locations in Thurso, Stornoway and Fort

William). As part of the recovery plan, a plan to rationalize the college's estates through a programme of divestment or significant review/cost-reduction has been approved by the Board in principle. However, given the current financial trajectory, this could eventually put all 16 rural and islands centres in scope for closure.

Whilst the financial analysis underpinning the proposals is sound, and has been essential to understand the college's current cost and income profile linked to the physical learning estate, the data used is necessarily historic, and has included a period of extreme change, with both Brexit loss of regional funding, and the extreme disruption of the Covid-era.

What has not yet been done is to

- look at the cost of providing mitigation for the potential closure<sup>8</sup> of rural and island centres in form of alternative service provision;
- undertake an economic impact analysis of the current rural and island college centre network, which analyses the wider economic and social impacts of the college's centres, or their potential replacement with an alternative or purely online service.
- consider systematically how the existing centres could be re-imagined (and made more profitable) in the light of once-in a generation economic development within the region and corresponding community needs to move towards next zero.

## **9. Looking forward: Review or Renew?**

One example a renewed centre purpose is **the Barra Centre**, which has already been designated within the Island Growth Deal Project 'Islands Centre for Net Zero' as a recognized community hub to facilitate an island community action network (ICAN), to support community transition towards net zero and act as a demonstration hub and island 'accelerator'. With similar interests from the community in Ullapool and Mallaig already stated, this could provide a new way forward to review and renew the role of the college's rural and island centres.

The college has also entered into an early dialogue with **the Open University (OU)**, who have significant number of learners within the college's operating area as well as engagement and provision with many of the over 30 secondary schools the college partners with. The OU seems genuinely interested in a strategic partnership which focuses on choice, place-based impact and an alliance which makes the case to government for improved equity of access and funding to better support rural, adult and part-time learners. A strategic partnership with OU could provide more opportunities for more learners accessing the college's rural and island centres for support and examination services, bringing more footfall into centres, whilst potentially reducing centre costs for the college.

These are just two examples already available to the college to review the current centres looking forward to renew its purpose or develop new strategic partnerships to create opportunities for local people and reduce costs.

## 10. Why Getting Estates Decisions Right Matters

Given that the college has made mission critical commitments to its multi-location distributed model, and given estates decisions are high-stakes and often irreversible, it is important that the Board have a decision making framework available to them which not only looks at past performance, but ties the college's estate to the current and future needs of learners, local communities and places. It is also important to understand the regulatory framework the college needs to be compliant with in the context of

Once a rural or island centre is closed, it is rarely reopened in the current financial climate, and the college risks losing critical visibility in the community, stakeholder trust and credibility at a time, when these communities are already under significant socio-economic stress and under threat of depopulation. For UHI NWH, and possibly for UHI as a whole currently considering its own 'transformation', this has implications not only for 'mission drift', but also for statutory compliance (see Appendix A for a full list of relevant legislation and policy applying to the college as a public body), the college's reputation, strategic consistency, financial trade-offs, and long-term resilience.

Rationalising rural and island centres to save £100k as part of a £3.2M recovery plan could, in reality, cost more through potential loss of rurality subsidy, reduced student recruitment, and diminished future opportunity, particularly in light of £100bn regional inward investment linked to green energy and net zero in the Highlands and Islands, which will increase demands on all communities in the college's operating area. With these significant opportunities on the near horizon materializing within the next three to five years, it is important that the Board look forward strategically how college assets can be used to realise these opportunities, rather than only look to short-term and smaller scale financial gains over the next two to three years.

However, given the real financial constraints and risks on the college, alongside a forward-looking review framework for decision making, an evidence-led decision making framework and sound business planning is required to ensure the college delivers the desired outcomes and impacts from each of its rural and island centres.

**The purpose of this report is therefore to guide Board-level decisions on how the college should serve all communities and places across its 12,545 mi<sup>2</sup> region, ensuring equity, visibility, and impact whether or not a permanent college site exists locally.**

## 11. What We Mean by an 'Anchor Institution'

An anchor institution is a publicly purposed organisation with a sustained presence in a place that generates long-term social, cultural and economic value. For UHI NWH this means the college:

- Maintains a visible, trusted presence in communities (physical or shared premises plus people and branding).
- Ensures equitable access to post-16 learning, skills, research and support irrespective of geography (equivalence of experience).

- Aligns programmes to local economies (e.g., renewables, marine, tourism, health & social care, digital, Gaelic/culture).
- Acts as a convenor across public services and employers to widen opportunity and build community wealth.
- Demonstrates measurable contribution to learner progression, local employment/procurement, and regional GVA.

This definition aligns well with UHI's four founding principles, which themselves define the term 'anchor institution' used:

- + *Educational opportunities for all: within the regions, based in communities.*
- + *Driving economic growth: Anchor institution and catalyst of economic development.*
- + *Co-creating education and research: Curriculum and research linked to the regions' unique landscape, heritage and culture.*
- + *Delivering social change: to build better futures for the regions*

## 12. The Policy & Legislative Environment – What 'Place' Demands of the college

Scottish policy explicitly embeds 'place'. The Place Principle (2019) and National Performance Framework NPF4 (2023) expect services to reflect local realities; the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 mandates island-proofing via the Island Communities Impact Assessment (ICIA). The current Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill going through the Scottish Parliament foregrounds 'anchor institutions' and the use of land, property, workforce and procurement to retain wealth locally, placing duties on all public bodies including colleges for creating local community wealth plans. Equality and Fairer Scotland duties require the college to consider protected characteristics and socio-economic disadvantage. SFC Outcome Agreements and the Financial Memorandum provide the funding/assurance context to ensure regionally coherent and high-quality provision.

### Why this matters to estates decisions

- 'Place' reframes centres as public value assets, not just buildings or rooms: they signal commitment, identity and parity for remote communities.
- ICIA makes island impacts and mitigations a statutory requirement in any closure or reconfiguration.
- Community Wealth building elevates local procurement, workforce and land/property reuse as legitimate value streams in decision-making.
- Equality and Fairer Scotland duties require analysis of who loses access to opportunity or services or is disproportionately impacted directly or indirectly, and how mitigations may compensate for this or how they will work in practice.

Appendix A provides a full checklist of all statutory and policy requirements the college needs to comply with when making decisions about its estates

### 13. An Anchor Institution Assessment Framework

Drawing on the themes of ‘place’, ‘community’, ‘opportunity’ within the merger business case [UHI North, West and Hebrides](#), the following attributes can be distilled for a potential framework:

#### Place

- The estate is described as providing a *fundamental sense of place*—a visible “touchpoint” for belonging and identity in each locality. Priorities include safe, accessible, net-zero facilities and optimal use across the region
- The region served is unusual in scale and dispersion (19 distinct communities across ~12,545 mi<sup>2</sup> and ~70% of Scotland’s coastline), making local presence + connectivity strategically essential.
- Named capital projects (e.g., STEM Centre Fort William, Thurso redevelopment, Mallaig and Broadford learning centres; and more recently, Easter Ross) operationalise place-based investment, albeit with funding still to be secured.

#### Community

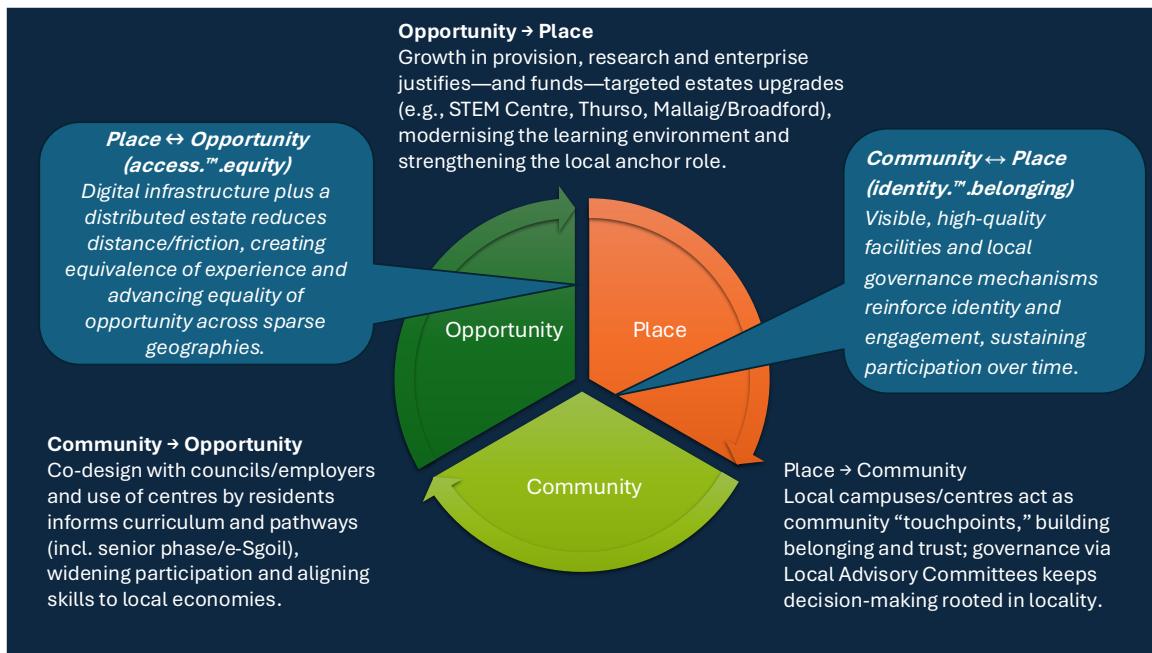
- The college’s governance model bakes in locality via *Local Advisory Committees* to ensure decisions reflect community contexts
- Learning centres are cast as flexible, shared facilities “where students and local communities come together.”
- The case emphasises close working with local authorities/employers and a seamless learner journey (including senior phase/e-Sgoil) to meet community needs.

#### Opportunity

- The merger aims to “bring improved equality of opportunity,” expand curriculum and micro-credentials, and support social/economic regeneration (islands, net-zero, renewables, Gaelic and engineering).
- Digital/ICT is positioned to make a *connected, flexible, distributed* organisation, improving access and consistency regardless of location.
- Estates and investment plans are tied to future growth and reinvestment, creating capacity for new provision and research.
- External analysis of the merger likewise highlights more opportunities for communities/businesses and workforce upskilling.

#### How do these three themes interlink?

The following provides a visual illustration of the interrelation between place, community and opportunity, within the concept of the ‘anchor institution’ role of the college:



Based on the above, the following framework is offered which could be used to assess the college’s role in any community or place, applying consistent criteria of *Place, Community, Opportunity, and Integration*:

**Scoring:** 1 = Weak / absent, 2 = Emerging, 3 = Adequate, 4 = Strong, 5 = Exemplary

Theme	Criteria	Guiding Questions for the Board	Score (1-5)	Notes / Evidence
<b>Place</b>	Visibility & accessibility	Is there a recognisable UHI NWH presence (centre, shared hub, digital)?		
	Belonging & identity	Do students/residents feel this is <i>their</i> college (branding, culture, Gaelic)?		
	Connectivity	Is the place digitally linked for an equitable learner experience?		
	Sustainability	Is provision aligned with net-zero and cost-effective use of facilities?		
<b>Community</b>	Local co-design	Are local stakeholders engaged in shaping provision (LACs, employers, councils)?		
	Shared benefit	Do facilities/services benefit the wider community as well as learners?		
	Equity of access	Does provision reduce rural/island/other inequality barriers?		

Theme	Criteria	Guiding Questions for the Board	Score (1-5)	Notes / Evidence
	Governance link	Is there a mechanism for local voices to reach Board decisions?		
Opportunity	Pathways	Are full learner journeys (school link, FE, HE, micro-credentials) accessible here?		
	Economic alignment	Does required provision match local/regional labour market needs?		
	Digital reach	Can online delivery be used to extend curriculum breadth and access?		
	Future growth	Is there potential for innovation, enterprise, or strategic partnership development?		
Integration & Impact	Joined-up presence	Do place, community, and opportunity reinforce one another here?		
	Measurable outcomes	Can we evidence social/economic regeneration impact from college activity?		

### How can the Board can use this assessment framework ?

The Anchor Institution Assessment framework could be applied to assessing both existing or new locations the college current does not yet cover, and make evidence based decisions which link to available data or past performance as well as future opportunity.

1. This framework can be applied to each locality under review (including those localities without a current centre building).
2. Each criterion can be scored from 1–5, noting evidence (data, stakeholder input, digital usage, curriculum demand).
3. It can be used to identify strengths and gaps – if Place is strong but Community is weak, targeted interventions can be made.
4. It can be used to make estate/service decisions based not only on cost but on anchor institution impact.
5. Aggregate scores can be used to compare centres/localities and prioritise where investment or alternative delivery models are most needed.

However, given the current financial constraints the college faces, financial information and risk needs to be added into this framework. This should consist of the financial analysis already undertaken for existing college centres, which would draw primarily on

- analysis of the current operation (maintenance costs, staff costs, and usage/income generated) = annual operating cost
- potential annual saving if closed

- lease/end date

## 14. A proposed Options Hierarchy for Rural and Island Centres

Using the Anchor Institution Assessment framework plus the financial risk assessment, the Board could consider an Options Hierarchy for rural and island centres as follows:

1. **Maintain/Invest** – retain or invest in an existing or new physical centre; this should be justified by a strong anchor score (above 3) and where a sustainable cost base can be achieved.
2. **Redesign/Share model** – consider co-location with another anchor institution, such as local council, library, NHS, third sector, or other strategic partners to reduce costs and risk to enhance sustainability; or to deliver jointly where mission, purpose and outcomes align or complement.
3. **Presence without Premises** – this is a model which would focus on ‘digital-first’ delivery, but could also include elements of online only or physical temporary presence to offer support for learners (for example, in shared premises such as a local library or community hall); another option could be local pop-up college hubs for clearly advertised/regular dates throughout the year in local community premises; a further model could be for mobile college provision (using existing models for purpose built vans such as mobile library, screen machine or banking facilities which bring a temporary physical college centre presence to a community location, following an advertised regular timetable).
4. **Close/withdraw from a location with Mitigations (last resort)** – this should only be considered if the anchor impact scores low and a mitigation plan is available which protects equity and access, with ‘digital first’ as a minimum.

## 15. Mitigation and Equality/Island Community Impact Assessments

If the college should consider closing an existing centre, it will be required to create a mitigation plan and undertake both **equality and islands community impact assessments** as required under legislation.

Both assessments have standard templates and approaches, and will need to be undertaken prior to a final decision being taken so potential impacts as well as proposed mitigations can be assessed.

Assessment should quantify number of students/communities affected, including specific groups with protected characteristics impacted on (including island groups), and increase in travel time to the next nearest college centre.

Potential mitigation measures may include:

- Travel/bursary support is made available
- Digital access hubs / study spaces are available
- Exam invigilation is being made available locally in shared premises
- Seasonal or mobile delivery is made available
- Community partnership use of facilities to reduce costs

Finally, the Board will need to consider a **stakeholder engagement strategy** to seek input from the following groups as a minimum:

**Internally** (in line with statutory consultation requirements as well as under the Fair Work convention):

- Staff
- trade unions
- students

**Externally:**

- Local Advisory Committee
- Key community partners in the affected location (Council, NHS, employers, community groups)
- Political/elected members

The following sections offer further more detailed frameworks to support either options 1 or 2 (maintain/invest/redesign/share) or 3 or 4 (presence without premises)

## 16. Framework for retaining or investing in local centres

This framework builds on the ‘anchor institution assessment framework’ and financial risk assessments, as well as options hierarchy above, providing an integrated checklist:

Dimension	Guiding Question	Anchor Impact Score (1-5)	Evidence / Notes
Equity & Access	Does the centre provide access where none exists locally? Does it serve island/remote/SIMD learners?		
Community & Culture	Does it act as a hub for community, Gaelic, identity, or trust-building?		
Economic & Skills	Does it support local industries/employers and regeneration?		
Financial Efficiency	Is it operated efficiently (shared premises, reasonable cost per learner)?		
Income Potential	Does it contribute proportionately through training, short courses, or facility use?		

The scoring for overall ‘anchor impact’ within this framework would support the following decision pathway to justify a continued physical presence:

Overall Anchor Impact	Cost per Learner	Decision
High	Reasonable	Subsidy/investment justified as part of core mission (continue investment)
High	High	Subsidy/investment conditionally justified – redesign/shared use required
Low	High	Subsidy/investment not justified – transition to presence-without-premises or closure
Moderate	Moderate	Subsidy/investment justified if partner contributions reduce net cost

## 17. Framework for moving to a 'presence without premises' model

This framework provides a set of detailed questions which should be answered in the affirmative to ensure the college can maintain its anchor institution role, but without a set of discrete physical premises within a community.

Domain	Criteria	Guiding Questions	Board Test
People	Local staff presence	Is at least one named staff member (coordinator/tutor/engagement lead) visibly allocated to this community to assure engagement and visibility of the college? (includes pop-up college hub or mobile unit)	Can every learner and community partner in this place name their UHI NWH contact person?
People	Visibility	Are staff accessible locally (set hours, advertised drop-ins, phone/video, including pop-up college hub or mobile unit)?	
People	Community connector role	Do relevant college staff actively liaise with employers, schools, and local groups to ensure community awareness and visibility of the college?	
Branding & Identity	Branded shared space	Is there UHI signage/branding in a partner facility?	If you walk into this community, would you know UHI NWH is here?
Branding & Identity	Consistent messaging	Do marketing/website/comms clearly show UHI's presence/timetable?	
Branding & Identity	Events & outreach	Are there regular branded activities (open days, workshops, cultural events)?	

Partnerships & Shared Hubs	Formal agreements	Do we have MOUs with local partners (council, NHS, community)?	Do we have a guaranteed, reliable venue and a partnership agreement for delivery here? Would a learner in this place have the same digital experience as one in Thurso, Stornoway or Fort William? Can we demonstrate that withdrawing a building does not withdraw opportunity?
Partnerships & Shared Hubs	Multi-use benefit	Does UHI presence bring added value for the wider community?	
Partnerships & Shared Hubs	Local Advisory Committee link	Is there a functioning feedback loop via LAC or similar?	
Digital Support & Infrastructure	Robust access	Do learners have reliable broadband and devices (home or hosted)?	
Digital Support & Infrastructure	Supported digital learning	Is there local support for digital access and troubleshooting?	
Digital Support & Infrastructure	Equivalence of experience	Do remote learners get the same quality of teaching/assessment and support as campus-based learners?	
Mitigation & Equity	Travel support	Are bursaries/timetabled transport in place for necessary travel?	
Mitigation & Equity	Exam/assessment provision	Is there local provision for exams and assessment?	
Mitigation & Equity	Equality & island impact	Is there a mitigation plan addressing equity and island disadvantage?	

Two additional key questions for the Board to consider in this context are:

- **Is the cost of the mitigation provided for a ‘presence without premises’ model less than the cost of maintaining physical premises?**
- **Is the mitigation model sustainable for the college in the longer term? (risk assessment of the mitigation plan)**

Should the answer be ‘no’ to either question, the Board should reconsider Options 1 or 2.

## 18. What should a great learning centre look like?

Whilst this report has offered a history and rationale for having rural and island learning centres as anchor institutions for place, community and opportunity, the question should be addressed as to what makes a great learning centre.

The following framework is offered as a set of quality benchmarks which could be used as a checklist for physical college centres which are to be maintained or invested in, to ensure we can develop the centre to ensure ‘excellence’.

### A great learning centre should be

#### Accessible and Visible

- Be easy to reach (physically and digitally) with transport links, parking, and safe access.
- Have clear identity and branding so the community recognises it as part of the college/university.
- Have flexible opening hours to meet learner and community needs.

#### Welcoming and Inclusive

- Provide a safe, supportive environment where learners of all ages and backgrounds feel they belong.
- Provide bilingual or culturally relevant provision (e.g. Gaelic).
- Retain staff (or local champions) who act as trusted points of contact for learners, community and employers, and proactively pursue local engagement, (they are a respected member of the local community, not just administrators).

#### Digitally Connected

- Have high-quality digital infrastructure that guarantees equivalence of experience with main campuses.
- Offer spaces for supported online learning, hybrid delivery, and access to specialist equipment remotely.
- Retain staff trained to help learners overcome digital barriers and support digital literacy.

#### Multi-functional and Shared

- Offer spaces that serve both learners and the wider community (training, enterprise, cultural events, public services).
- Either be co-located with other services (libraries, council hubs, NHS, enterprise agencies) or have the capacity to invite other service providers to co-locate on college-run premises to maximise use and reduce cost.
- Provide flexible layouts (small seminar space, hot-desking, quiet study, meeting rooms).

#### Locally Anchored

- Centre is designed around local needs, shaped by Local Advisory Committees or equivalent.
- Curriculum is aligned with local economy (tourism, renewables, health & care, creative industries).

- Has the ability to host short, intensive, or pop-up provision that responds to employer demand.

#### **A Gateway to Opportunity**

- Provision of visible pathways from school → FE → HE → work-based learning.
- Guidance, careers advice, and digital access points are available so learners can see the next step in their learner journey.
- A place that actively promotes widening participation and lifelong learning.

#### **Sustainable and Future-proof**

- The centre is energy-efficient, affordable to run, sustainably designed with net-zero goals in mind.
- It offers flexible delivery models (physical + digital) so the centre remains viable even at low volumes.
- There is concrete evidence of impact on learners, community, and local economy to justify continued investment.

#### **Monitor a set of agreed Place-based KPIs, which could include**

- The number of local partnerships (council, community, third sector, employers)
- number of people in work-based learning (apprenticeships/SVQs)
- number of people undertaken a skills-based short course
- number of people accessing FE or HE courses
- conversion of school pupils to post-school UHI courses
- research, KE and innovation projects aligned to local smart specialisation and Net Zero priorities.
- Number of people achieving a named qualification
- Number of people in a positive post-course destination
- Student Retention rates
- Student Satisfaction rates
- Achieving set core and non-core income targets
- Ability to provide evidence for the ‘great learning centre’ set of quality benchmarks

**In short, a great learning centre is not just a building — it is:**

- **a local beacon of the college** (and UHI)
- **a digital and physical bridge to opportunity**, and
- **a trusted community hub that makes post-school tertiary education (and research) part of everyday life in a place.**

## 19. The role of ‘People’ in making a great Learning Centre

It is also important to further clarify the role of ‘people’ in making a learning centre ‘great’. Irrespective of the college delivering its services in a physical building or digitally only, people are key to the college’s success.

### People act as the “face” of the college

- Staff (centre managers, engagement leads, support workers, lecturers, learning assistants) provide the human connection that makes a centre welcoming.
- In rural/island communities, *knowing there is someone to go to* is as important as having a room with computers.
- People build trust and belonging — which is especially vital in communities where institutions may feel remote or abstract.

### People act as connectors

- Staff act as ‘navigators of opportunity’: they are signposting learners to wider UHI provision, careers advice, funding, or digital support.
- They are often the key link to schools, employers, councils, and community groups — something technology cannot replicate.
- In Gaelic- or culturally distinct communities, staff embody local identity and language in a way that anchors the college to place.

### People act as enablers of ‘digital-first’

- A ‘digital-first’ principle only works if people help learners cross the digital divide:
  - Setting up access, troubleshooting technology, explaining online systems.
  - Providing *confidence coaching* for learners with low digital literacy (important for learners of all ages, but especially older learners).
- Without staff support, ‘digital-first’ risks becoming digital-only — which can alienate the most disadvantaged learners.

### People act as advocates and anchors

- Staff in local centres are ambassadors for the college and UHI in their community.
- They build goodwill, respond to local needs quickly, and provide both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ intelligence back to the college.
- They also sustain continuity of presence even if physical premises are reduced or shared.

Combining the quality benchmark checklist with the role of people in creating a great learning centre, the following can be concluded:

1. every learning centre (whether a physical building or a ‘presence without premise’) should adopt a ‘digital first’ principle; ‘digital first’ provides scalability and breadth of curriculum, a cost efficient delivery model which provides maximum access to curriculum choice, and is sustainable with clear environmental benefits.
2. however, a ‘digital first’ model has clear limitations: it cannot by itself build trust, belonging or identity which are key features of a great learning centre and student experience, especially so in fragile rural, island and minority language/Gaelic speaking communities.

**A great learning centre is digital first, but not digital only; it is people-led:**

- ‘digital’ provides access, flexibility and connection to the wider college and university
- people provide welcome, guide and connect through safe access, confidence building and community anchoring
- physical buildings provide a base for both as added value to people and ‘digital’

Finally, how easy is it to achieve a great learning centre without physical premises?

## 20. Achieving a Great Learning Centre Without a Physical Premises

Without a defined physical building or unit, the following is possible or easier to achieve:

- **Digital-first access:** Learners can study anywhere with broadband, using laptops or local devices.
- **Mobile / pop-up provision:** Classes, workshops, and exam invigilation can be delivered flexibly in schools, community halls, or libraries.
- **Staff visibility:** A local staff member can “hot-desk” in shared facilities and still act as the trusted face of the college.
- **Cost reduction:** Avoiding the fixed costs of rent, rates, and maintenance can be crucial in a deficit recovery context.

Without a physical, branded presence, the following is harder to achieve:

- **Identity & belonging:** A building with UHI signage signals “we are *here for this community*”. Without it, the college risks being invisible, relying solely on the effectiveness of staff visibility and mobile/pop-up provision.
- **Consistency:** Shared or borrowed spaces may be less reliable in terms of opening hours, equipment, and learner experience, therefore potentially weakening trust and credibility (below)
- **Trust & credibility:** Communities often judge commitment by physical presence. ‘No physical building’ may be read by a community as ‘withdrawal’ or lack of permanence and equity.
- **Community use & partnership:** Centres can double as physical hubs for employers, community groups, and local services — this harder to replicate if the college is “just online.”
- **Value Proposition:** Especially in rural and island contexts, a visible centre embodies the *founding UHI promise* of parity with more urban campuses and the rest of Scotland

## 21. Conclusion

Based on the definition of an anchor institution and what makes a great rural or island learning centre delivering an equitable learner experience, it is clear that providing coverage for our communities in the North, West and Hebrides cannot be reduced to the number of buildings that make up the colleges distributed learning estate infrastructure.

The college's presence in a community is defined by people, who are critical both to create trusted and predictable physical access points as well as digital access and parity for learners in even the most remote locations.

This report set out to offer a strategic set of frameworks for the college to assess, review and quality assure its current 16 rural and island centres, and make evidence-based decisions which allow for either retention, redesign, presence without premises or withdrawal.

One way forward for the college to use this tool kit could be by creating a new classification of all of the college's premises as follows and offered to the Board for discussion:

Major Campus	Thurso, Stornoway and Fort William	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• These main campuses serve as regional anchors, supporting large scale delivery, full curriculum breadth, specialist workshops and facilities for learning and teaching, research and enterprise;</li><li>• they represent the critical mass of activity for the college;</li></ul>
Strategic Hub	Dale Farm, Dornoch, Alness, Portree, Lochalsh (1), Uist (1); new: Easter Ross (post-NSA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• These are medium-sized premises in key parts of the colleges operating area;</li><li>• these centres deliver key FE and HE programmes, vocational training and act as local employer interface;</li><li>• whilst smaller than the three main campuses, they are still essential for local presence in fragile rural and island areas;</li><li>• they could move to co-location/shared model over time to reduce costs</li></ul>
Flexible community access points (could be leased premises, shared premises or presence without premises)	Mallaig, Ardnamurchan Peninsula, Gairloch, Ullapool, Barra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• These are the smaller learning centres, supporting mainly digital learning access to FE and HE, short courses, pop-up delivery, exam invigilation and engagement activities with community and local employers</li><li>• College presence is still key for</li></ul>

		anchor purposes but should be at a proportionate cost and flexible, including shared or collocated premises
Digital First and mobile provision	<p>All locations within the college's operating area (and UHI as relevant; plus national/international digital delivery)</p> <p>For consideration of focused new engagement activity: Harris; Lewis (outwith Stornoway travel distance); Small Isles and Knoydart; North-West Highlands (Kishorn and Applecross; north of Ullapool and West of Thurso); Caithness (outwith Thurso or Dornoch travel distance)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Digital first' is the only way the whole college's operating area can be covered, given demographic profile and distances to travel;</li> <li>• Every learner should be able to access and equivalent learning experience digitally, with local staff support;</li> <li>• Mobile or scheduled pop-up provision could be developed to reach even the smalles or most remote communities;</li> </ul>

Geography in the UHI NWH region is a structural barrier: remote rural and island communities face long travel times, weather-dependent transport, and digital inequalities. Population decline is acute (National Records of Scotland 2023; Scottish Government Depopulation Action Plan 2024).

Post-school learning centres are critical to community resilience and thriving places: they anchor young people, offer adult upskilling, support families, help promote Gaelic/culture, and can provide multi-service hubs. Without our rural and islands centres, the college not only risks its stated merger mission, but risks already , fragile communitiesmoving into further decline.

The Highlands & Islands is entering a period of transformational opportunity: HIE identifies £100bn offshore wind, hydrogen and subsea investment (HIE Transformational Opportunities Report 2023); Workforce North projects large-scale demand for construction, engineering, and digital skills (SDS 2024); the Just Transition to Net Zero requires local training capacity to anchor benefits in communities; and HIREP (2024 draft strategy) emphasises distributed skills delivery.

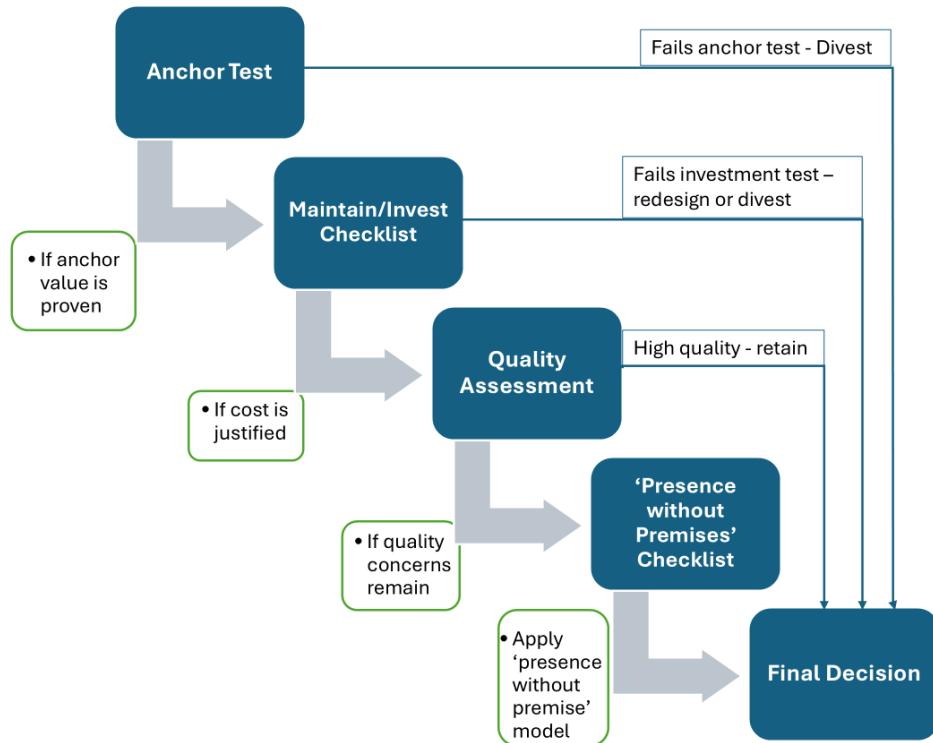
The strategic decision frameworks offered in this report could re-position and re-imagine the college's rural and island centres not as mere legacy costs but as strategic enablers for these once-in-a-generation opportunities — ensuring that rural/island learners, communities and employers can participate fully in and benefit from the green economy revolution and the just transition towards net zero being led from the Highlands and Islands..

## 22. Bringing it all together: Applying the Frameworks – From Assessment to Decision

Based on this report, it is recommended that the college adopts the following sequence to assess its estates strategy and infrastructure delivery framework:

1. Run the Anchor Institution Assessment Framework to determine anchor value and strategic fit with the college, place-based and regional or national economic opportunities or priorities.
2. Apply the framework for retaining or investing in a centre to test whether higher costs are warranted and where centre redesign could potentially reduce them.
3. Use the Learning Centre Quality Framework to diagnose experience gaps that potentially suppress optimal utilisation (fix before closing).
4. If closure of a centre is proposed as a result of having run these frameworks, run the ‘Presence-Without-Premises’ checklist to guarantee people/branding/digital/equity minimum standards of provision., ensuring the minimum service delivery is sustainable and is more cost effective than maintaining a centre
5. Complete required Islands Community Impact Assessments and Equality/Fairer Scotland assessments; set mitigations and budget for them.
6. Present a recommendation within the new options hierarchy for all 16 rural and island centres: Retain; Redesign/Share; Presence without Premises; Divest with Mitigations.

The following Centre Decision Flowchart visually supports these steps:



## 23. Governance, Assurance and Transparency

Given the mission-critical nature of the decisions made by the Board in this context, it is recommended to deploy an approach which satisfies anticipated internal and external scrutiny and makes fully transparent the evidence and impact assessments made prior to reaching a final decision. The following steps are proposed for review by the Board:

- Agree a critical path for engagement, impact assessment and board reporting to enable key decision points throughout the year
- Ensure that all Board decisions regarding any divestment or substantial change of land ownership or learning centres are compliant with legislative and policy duties expected of the college as a public body. (Appendix A lists all these legislative and policy requirements including a checklist for use with Board reporting)
- Publish an annual island and rurality statement, reporting on key place-based performance indicators, learning centre review and evidence considered to support change decisions this could include mapping SFC rurality funding to anchor priorities and redesign projects
- Require ICIA and Equality Impact Assessments as key evidence appendices to any change proposal affecting island/rural communities.
- Review a quarterly dashboard covering agreed place-based KPIs, including reviewing guarantee of equitable student and staff experience
- Engage Local Advisory Committees, councils, HIE, employers and other key stakeholders and partners on proposed changes early;
- publish mitigations and timelines for any change decisions as part of an agreed communications plan

## 24. Recommendations for Board Approval

That the Board

- Notes the report on the role of the college as an anchor institution
- Adopts the frameworks offered for anchor value, maintain and invest, presence without premises, quality checklist and place based KPIs
- Adopts the Decision Matrix and require its use in all estates papers; aligning recommendations to the options hierarchy.
- Approves the Presence-Without-Premises criteria as minimum standards for service delivery; no closure of centre proceeds without these in place.
- Agrees that ICIA and EQAs are a mandatory requirement for any change decision
- Ensures the legal and policy compliance checklist in Appendix A has been completed as part of the evidence supporting Board decisions

Based on these recommendations, the Board has assurance that **no decision on learning centre rationalisation, redesign or divestment is made on financial grounds alone**, but that all statutory, cultural and anchor duties have been met.

**Lydia Rohmer, 15 September 2025**

## Appendix A– Legislative & Policy Compliance Framework for Estates Decisions

**Purpose:** This appendix consolidates all legislative and policy requirements that must be considered before the Board approves any rationalisation, redesign, or divestment of a rural or island learning centre. It ensures decisions are legally compliant, auditable, and consistent with UHI NWH’s role as an anchor institution.

Legislation / Policy	Duty / Requirement	Board Compliance Test
<b>Land Reform (Scotland) Acts 2003, 2015, 2016</b>	Community Right to Buy provisions; community bodies can acquire land/buildings on disposal.	Has the Board tested whether a Right to Buy process may be triggered? Have community interests been invited?
<b>Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015</b>	Right to request asset transfer; enhanced community participation duties.	Has asset transfer been considered before closure/disposal? Was community participation evidenced?
<b>Land Rights &amp; Responsibilities Statement (2022)</b>	Transparent, sustainable management of public assets.	Is the estates decision demonstrably in the public interest, with sustainability considered?
<b>Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 &amp; National Islands Plan (2019–)</b>	Statutory duty to island-proof policies/services; ICIA required.	Has an ICIA been completed for any centre in island communities? Are mitigations documented and costed?
<b>Equality Act 2010 (Public Sector Equality Duty) &amp; Fairer Scotland Duty</b>	Advance equality; consider socio-economic disadvantage.	Has an Equality Impact Assessment been carried out? Has socio-economic disadvantage been assessed and mitigated?
<b>National Planning Framework 4 (2023) &amp; Place Principle (2019)</b>	Services designed around place; accessible “20-minute neighbourhoods” adapted to rural/island contexts.	Does the proposal show how local accessibility, place-identity and partnership use are protected or enhanced?
<b>Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill (forthcoming)</b>	Anchor institutions; five pillars (spending, workforce, land/property, inclusive ownership, finance).	Does the decision paper demonstrate anchor value? Has procurement, workforce and shared asset use been considered?

Legislation / Policy	Duty / Requirement	Board Compliance Test
<b>Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 &amp; National Gaelic Language Plan</b>	Support Gaelic language and culture in relevant communities.	For centres in Gaelic-speaking areas, has the impact on Gaelic/culture been assessed and protected?
<b>Scottish Funding Council (SFC) Financial Memorandum &amp; Accounts Direction</b>	Ensure financial sustainability and compliance with national funding conditions.	Does the paper quantify net savings/costs, rurality funding implications, and provide sensitivity analysis?
<b>Public Finance &amp; Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000</b>	Public value, auditability, transparency in use of public funds.	Can the decision withstand Audit Scotland scrutiny? Is there an audit trail of compliance?
<b>National Strategy for Economic Transformation (2022) &amp; H&amp;I Regional Economic Strategy (HIREP)</b>	Align tertiary skills with Net Zero, just transition, inclusive growth.	Does the centre align with regional opportunities (e.g. Workforce North, green skills, just transition)?
<b>Gaelic, Cultural &amp; Heritage Strategies (local/national)</b>	Sustain local culture, language and identity.	Has the Board considered the cultural/heritage role of the centre?