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**Epping Forest District Council
Response to proposal to merge Epping Forest College with new City Council**

General

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed merger and the consultation document "A new vision for further education in north east London and the Essex Borders".

The council's key priority has always been a local college that is focused on meeting the needs of local learners, local businesses and its local community through the provision of outstanding skills and education and lifelong learning opportunities for the people of Epping Forest District. The district includes a generally affluent population, rural and urban communities and an economic base characterised by a heavy reliance on SMEs and a few major employers. Epping Forest District, while closely connected to the Capital, is not in London and whilst many employed people living in the south of the district commute into London, residents generally identify themselves with Essex and enjoy the benefits of their rural location.

The council has always taken a close interest in the college and has been aware of the issues it has faced and has been concerned as its Ofsted rating has declined. It has been heartened by its recent improvement and has recognised the changes and new direction brought about under the leadership of the current Principal, and its change of direction moving it out of special measures to a Grade 3.

In addition the council has been aware of the financial challenge faced by smaller colleges across the country and in particular Epping Forest College, however it is also aware of the significant property assets the college owns in Epping Forest District which exceed its debts.

The Council's key priority for its single FE provision is a provider focused on and responsive to current and future local need, driven by local stakeholders as set out above. However the council also understands the national policy drive to move to larger institutions which are more financially resilient but believes that, in cases such as this, fiscal opportunism must be balanced against the need to retain a college for Epping Forest, rather than a campus in Epping Forest.

Key Concerns

The Council and its partners locally have expressed numerous key concerns with this process and the outcomes, the principal concerns are set out below.

- Epping Forest College has struggled with the locally held, but inaccurate perception, that its student recruitment favoured people from London and disadvantaged those in the district, resulting in a poor performance with regard to local applications. This propaganda has been successfully challenged by the current Principal and the community's perception and local relations are being turned around. The proposed merger with a London College Group threatens to undo this work by

reinforcing the negative view and act as a further disincentive to local recruitment. Therefore the consultation and resulting restructuring needs to address this sensitively and specifically taking every advantage to enhance a local focus and local benefit when considering options.

- The proposal document presents a merger with New City College as the single option for the way forward. Looking at the recent college performance improvements and the assets available to ensure financial viability, this merger would not appear to be the only option available. Given this as being the case, then a merger with a college serving a similar community and business base (i.e. Herts Regional College) would be preferable. Council officers have repeatedly made this view clear in the process.
- The haste with which this merger has been enacted has caused grave concern and consternation. For many interested parties, one month is too short a period to become aware of the consultation proposal document, obtain information, share and discuss it with members, committees, managers etc and then construct and agree a response. A period of several months is more usual and would certainly allow for a comprehensive and considered response in this instance. For such a significant proposal this must surely be the desired outcome.
- Also of concern is the 'lumping together' of Epping Forest and Havering Colleges in the due diligence process, even though Epping Forest and Havering Colleges are on completely different merger timetables. This serves none of the colleges and their communities well. In a process such as this it is important that the merger is seen to be fairly and efficiently conducted, with the taxpayer interest, and the interests of local communities as well as the college taking over, at its centre. The Council understands that if the original merger process is adhered to this will be significantly quicker than any other so far undertaken.
- The council is concerned that the significant land assets of Epping Forest College are not liquidated in a way that disadvantages local communities and learners, in order to finance and underpin the expansion plans of New City College in London. Since local schools and amenities, including associated open land, was given over to the provision of an FE campus, local people have expressed strong views on the use and benefits of these resources to the local people and this has been reflected in the interest paid by their local representatives in the council.
- The council is concerned that the longstanding close connection on governance between the College Corporation Governors and the local community will be broken, and is unclear what, if any local governorship arrangements will be put in place, and what if any real influence and or power such a body might be allowed to exercise over the college. At the moment the college governors have final say in all matters pertaining to appointments, asset disposal, as well as syllabus offer and policy.
- The Council is concerned that the local FE offer maybe unduly influenced by the needs and delivery patterns of other colleges in the NCC Group and the syllabus on offer to local learners will be narrow and reflect more the needs of the wider group, than local learners and businesses. It is further concerned that some aspects of provision and delivery will be centralised further leading to an offer not fully tailored to local opportunity and need or influenced and informed by the various bodies working locally on skills and training agendas. This is particularly concerning given two key local elements, employer responsive and apprenticeships are earmarked to central control within the merger proposal document.

In summary, the Council has specific concerns as detailed above and an overall concern about the short timescale for responses which it believes inhibits respondents from returning a properly researched and considered reply. This is therefore presents an unsatisfactory basis for decision making that properly reflects key stakeholders views. Given its concerns, and a wish to fully engage with the merger process, the Council is willing to work with whatever partner takes over. It would be especially keen to contribute, in a constructive way, in addressing the priorities set out in this response. Although viewed as the ideal route to contribute to the merger process, whether such involvement is possible or not, the council would require some clear and specific pledges on the key areas of concern.

Yours sincerely

Derek Macnab
Acting Chief Executive