Consultation Document

Proposed Merger of Gloucestershire College and Royal Forest of Dean College
Contents

1. Foreword 3
2. Executive Summary 4
3. The Need for Change 5
4. Our Vision 6
5. Benefits of Merger 7
5.1 For learners and potential learners 7
5.2 For employers 7
5.3 For our communities 7
5.4 For staff 7
6. Key Aspects of the Merged College 8
6.1 Increasing participation in learning 8
6.2 Improving employability 8
6.3 Investment in buildings and facilities 9
6.4 Management and leadership of the new college 9
6.5 Retaining and developing our excellent teaching and support staff 9
6.6 Stronger together 10
6.7 Finance 10
6.8 Equality and diversity 10
6.9 Quality and success rates 10
6.10 Innovation 10
7. Name of the College 11
8. Risks and Limitations 12
9. How to Respond 13
Annex A
  Background of the Colleges 14
Annex B
  Merger Criteria 16
Annex C
  Glossary of Terms 17
1. Foreword

This document sets out the background to our proposal for the merger of Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology (known as ‘Gloucestershire College’) and Royal Forest of Dean College. It describes how we want to improve opportunities for individual learners and businesses, benefit the wider community and to draw informed comment from you. It is the view of our Governing Bodies that the combined institution will be better placed to meet the future challenges facing our communities.

We would therefore welcome your comments and views on the proposed reorganisation before we finalise our plans. Please follow the link below to the online survey or use the alternatives provided at the end of this document to give us your views by 14 October 2010.

Online survey: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/proposedmergerconsultationRFDC_GC

You can also access this document on the following websites together with a link to information on how to respond:

www.gloscol.ac.uk or www.rfdc.ac.uk

We are very excited and confident about the future of further and higher education in the Forest of Dean and the rest of the County and, with your help, we can shape and develop a merged college that will meet the diverse needs of the local learning communities. We firmly believe that the proposed merged college is in the best interest of all of our stakeholders, including staff and students of the two Colleges.

Graham Ripley
Chair, Gloucestershire College

Alan Williams
Chair, Royal Forest of Dean College
2. Executive Summary

The Forest of Dean is a vital part of the heritage, community and business base that makes up Gloucestershire. Royal Forest of Dean College has played a pivotal role in meeting employer needs and raising aspirations in that area. The continuation of the College in the Forest of Dean is now under threat due to issues of financial viability. We have proposed to the Skills Funding Agency that the best way forward to ensure the future of the existing high quality education and training in the Forest of Dean is to merge Royal Forest of Dean College with Gloucestershire College.

We see the main benefits of the merger as:

- Safeguarding existing provision in the Forest which is under threat
- Increasing learner choices which will lead to stronger vocational opportunities
- Providing financial stability for provision in the Forest and increasing opportunities for capital investment in facilities
- Providing a significant contribution to economic regeneration in the Forest and the rest of the County, through the safeguarding and expansion of skills training in the Forest
- Enhancing the service and range of offer to employers
- Improving information, advice and guidance to all potential learner groups
- The areas of strength of Royal Forest of Dean College will complement those of Gloucestershire College resulting in overall benefits for the Colleges, learners and their communities
- Reducing wasteful competition and duplication
- Providing progression opportunities on to higher level courses.

The merger has the support of both sets of governors, local MPs and the 14-19 commissioning body:

“Gloucestershire County Council actively supports the proposed merger as a way of ensuring the continued provision of high quality education and training for residents of the Forest of Dean.” Peter Holmes, Head of 14-19 Commissioning, Gloucestershire County Council.

We believe our proposal will meet the published criteria for college mergers set out at Annex B but we welcome views on this throughout this consultation.
3. The Need for Change

The main rationale for the merger is to safeguard the existence and widen the breadth of Further Education provision delivered in the Forest of Dean. The current funding climate makes it very difficult for small colleges to offer high quality learning opportunities. The future financial outlook for Royal Forest of Dean College is bleak as it lacks the critical mass to achieve the efficiencies needed to continue, and to invest in modern learning resources, attract high calibre staff and offer a diverse range of courses in the Forest. Without merger the range of programmes offered will be diminished significantly.

In 2008 the Royal Forest of Dean College commissioned KPMG to undertake a strategic options review to identify how best to protect provision in the Forest. KPMG concluded that the preferred option was merger with a local institution to ‘increase scale, reduce competition and duplication, raise quality and improve pathways at all levels of learning, to improve marketing and to raise the whole County identity of further education as well as raising success and access levels’.

After much consideration and discussion with potential partners, the governors of Royal Forest of Dean College concluded that Gloucestershire College represented the best suited partner for merger.
4. Our Vision

The scale of the merged college will create something better for local learners than just maintaining the existing provision. It would create greater choice, higher quality, better progression opportunities, raised success levels, better travel to learn options and enhanced employer engagement.

Our vision is to provide inspirational facilities, resources and curriculum to engage more 14-19 and adult learners than ever before, to improve significantly their employability, to provide employers with access to on the job and bespoke skills training, and to enhance economic prospects for the area.

We see this vision being delivered not only in partnership with local schools, colleges and private providers, with all that they have to offer, but being steered and influenced by the needs and voices of other stakeholders and community planners, especially those of employers and our learners.

Our vision encompasses:

- The protection of further education provision delivered in the Forest of Dean
- A commitment to raising all aspects of the quality of provision
- Using our shared expertise to improve employer engagement and work-based skills training
- Widening learner choice and increasing progression opportunities available to local residents
- Building a curriculum offer that targets groups who are traditionally underrepresented
- A financially strong institution
- Investing in facilities and learning resources to meet the needs of 21st century learning
- Utilising the complementary strength of each institution to do things even better
- Maintaining the separate identity of each locality served by the new institution
- Offering an inclusive facility, providing opportunities for all.
5. Benefits of Merger

We believe there will be many benefits to all concerned including:

5.1 For learners and potential learners
- Safeguarding of further education provision in the Forest
- An improved and more comprehensive range of vocational learning opportunities at all levels, as well as A Levels
- Greater emphasis on employability and preparation for work
- Clear planned progression for learners to higher levels of qualification such as degrees
- Increased work based learning opportunities including apprenticeships
- Enhancement of facilities and resources in the Forest of Dean
- Improved information, advice and guidance for all learners

5.2 For employers
The merged College would strengthen its service to employers by:
- Utilising Gloucestershire College’s greater business development expertise to more effectively engage with employers in the Forest of Dean
- Improving the employability skills of those joining the local workforce from schools and colleges in the area
- Involving employers in curriculum delivery and design
- Providing a single point of access for flexible skills training and qualification-led programmes provided by the merged college or its partners through brokerage networks
- Increasing the pool of apprentices in the area and widening the range of apprenticeship and employer training available
- Creating a more responsive organisation with the strategic ability and capacity to invest in sectors with local skills shortages, tailoring solutions to specific needs

5.3 For our communities
The merged college will ensure that learning is available and accessible to each of its communities. Provision will continue to be offered within the Forest of Dean.

5.4 For staff
The merged college will open opportunities for staff to become involved in a wider range of teaching, management and support roles, and our intention is to raise resources to the very high standards enjoyed at Gloucestershire College’s other campuses which will, over time, provide a better working environment. The increased size of the organisation will provide new opportunities in terms of career progression and staff development.
6. Key Aspects of the Merged College

We will merge by transferring Royal Forest of Dean College’s assets and liabilities to Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology Corporation. The proposed date for the merger of the two Colleges is January 2011. There is a commitment within both organisations that the merger will be carried out in a collaborative spirit and taking advantage of the strengths of both Colleges. The name of the merged college will be Gloucestershire College.

The combined college will deliver from four principal locations – the campuses in Cheltenham, Gloucester and Coleford in the Forest of Dean, and the Launchpad skills centre in Tewkesbury, which is operated in conjunction with Tewkesbury, Chipping Campden and Cleeve Schools.

6.1 Increasing participation in learning

The participation levels of young people in Gloucestershire is rising but at age 17 is below the South West average; attainment at Level 2 and Level 3 is below the South West average; and 3.8% of the 16-18 cohort are categorised as not being in education, employment or training (NEET).

The merger must support participation by providing a comprehensive programme of courses, delivered in innovative and imaginative ways through state of the art learning facilities that encourages people to learn. The merged college will aim to increase the participation and attainment to above the South West average.

The curriculum offer will be enhanced by utilising expertise in each institution to offer programmes not currently available to ensure there is a good range of programmes to attract those not currently engaged in learning. The increased scale of the merged organisation would help safeguard programmes with small numbers of learners. The travel subsidy schemes available for Gloucestershire College students will be extended to those in the Forest.

The Royal Forest of Dean College campus will continue to offer A Levels as well as an extensive vocational programme at entry level and Levels 1, 2 and 3.

Gloucestershire College is directly funded for higher education programmes, unlike Royal Forest of Dean College, and will use this to develop direct progression opportunities for higher level programmes in the Forest of Dean.

6.2 Improving employability

We will develop a curriculum which will focus on the skills and knowledge which are relevant to employment and the needs of the workplace. We will ensure that our learners are well prepared whether they are just entering their working lives or wanting opportunities to take their career to a new level. By combining, we will be able to provide a wider offer to employers across the County and an enhanced one stop shop for information, advice and guidance.

For example, Gloucestershire College currently offers apprenticeships in areas that Royal Forest of Dean College does not, such as Engineering, Building Services and Motor Vehicle. These apprenticeship offerings will be extended to the Forest of Dean.
6.3 Investment in buildings and facilities
Investment will be needed in the facilities in the Forest to bring them to the standard enjoyed by Gloucestershire College’s other sites. Gloucestershire College is renowned for its IT and ILT facilities and the infrastructure would be enhanced to this level. Ultimately, significant investment would be needed in the campus facilities. A new build would be one option to be considered. In the last decade Gloucestershire College has successfully built new campuses in Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury and thus has significant expertise in these areas.

Whatever the solution, the facilities would be modelled to reflect our desire to enhance the learning experience through innovative design, incorporating flexibility and sustainability.

In the short term, investment would be made to bring the information technology and learning resources up to the very high standard of Gloucestershire College’s other buildings, ensure resources like Activ Boards are available in all classrooms, and provide connectivity to existing resources available to Gloucestershire College students.

6.4 Management and leadership of the new college
It is important that the identity of Royal Forest of Dean College is maintained in the new combined institution. This will be promoted by the naming of the Forest campus as ‘The Royal Forest of Dean Campus’, the inclusion of two of the existing Forest Governors on the Board of Gloucestershire College, and the establishment of an advisory board to consider issues pertaining to further education in the Forest and make recommendations to the main Gloucestershire College board.

The merged college will be led by Greg Smith, the Principal of Gloucestershire College. There is a commitment that managers will be based at each of the merged college’s primary sites, including the Forest, to ensure leadership is provided locally, to enhance communication and to ensure consistent standards.

6.5 Retaining and developing our excellent teaching and support staff
The merger aims to grow provision which will create opportunities for existing staff and scope to recruit new specialist staff. We will develop a strong Human Resource strategy to integrate the skilled and highly motivated staff from across the two Colleges. Staff development plans will drive the aspiration for excellence in teaching, learning and skills training delivery from an early stage. The merged college will build on the best employment practices of both Colleges, and provide a rewarding and stimulating working environment for its staff. We recognise that the commitment and effectiveness of staff is central to the success of the merged college.

Staff terms and conditions will be subject to TUPE and additional legal requirements. In order to promote clarity for staff and to ensure best practice is applied to the review of employment conditions in the merged college, we will seek to communicate and consult with our employees both individually and through the recognised trade unions. We will work openly and fairly with staff and adopt best practice in working with staff in both organisations.

The state of the public sector finances is well known and colleges will be asked to play their part in delivering high quality services at a significantly lower cost. The merger provides the opportunity to realise efficiency savings in order to safeguard frontline delivery to learners. The precise impact on staffing structures cannot be assessed until the scale of savings required is determined by the Government. The merged college will make all best endeavours to protect staff jobs and will consult with staff on any changes.
6.6 Stronger together
Between us, Royal Forest of Dean College and Gloucestershire College account for more further education delivery to Gloucestershire than any other provider and so our proposal builds on what is already there. (See Annex B for more background on the Colleges). Between them our institutions have good experience of engaging and motivating both young people and adults at all levels of ability, interest and background. We have complementary curriculum and quality strengths which we are bringing together to the maximum advantage of our learners. For example, Royal Forest of Dean College has recognised strengths in providing student support and learner services and in Equality and Diversity. These will be used to enhance the quality of service and success rates of all learners across the merged college. Gloucestershire College has strengths in partnership working and improving learner resources and facilities, which will be used to engage more learners and employers and enhance the quality of facilities available.

We are already working together in areas such as procurement and estates planning. Merger is the next step on the journey we have already begun.

Combining our institutions will improve the financial viability of further education provision in the Forest and enable much needed investment in modern premises, to broaden and enhance the learning opportunities. It will also create a stronger combined institution, providing a better offer for the County.

6.7 Finance
Royal Forest of Dean College is in a weak financial position, whereas Gloucestershire College’s finances are strong. The merger will provide further financial benefits through its size and ability to secure operational efficiencies. Together the merged college will be better placed to tackle the financial cut backs we will all be facing and to invest in bringing the facilities in the Forest up to the standards enjoyed by learners at Gloucestershire College.

6.8 Equality and diversity
A full equality and diversity impact assessment will be conducted to ensure the merger improves access to learning opportunities for all groups. Both Colleges have been assessed as having strength in this area by OFSTED.

6.9 Quality and success rates
Both Colleges were awarded good grades in their last OFSTED inspection. The merger will enable the combination of the key strengths in each College to further improve. Quality improvement systems will be implemented based on teaching observations, performance management, learner feedback, success rates and self-assessment.

6.10 Innovations
All learners in the merged college will benefit from the strengths of each College’s innovation. For example Gloucestershire College is renowned for its use of technology in learning, whereas Royal Forest of Dean College has had success in delivering on-line learning in basic skills and other areas.
7. Name of the College

The name of the merged college will be ‘Gloucestshire College’, reflecting the nature of the new organisation. Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology currently trades as Gloucestershire College.

To promote the separate identity of the provision offered in the Forest, the campus there will be called The Royal Forest of Dean Campus.
8. Risks and Limitations

The key risk if the merger does not go ahead is that the range of further education delivered within the Forest of Dean is likely to be significantly diminished and the learning resources available are likely to be significantly poorer. At worst, without merger, further education could cease to be delivered in the Forest of Dean. Royal Forest of Dean College on its own lacks the financial means to continue, let alone make major investment in its site and facilities.

The current financial position of Gloucestershire College is very good and there is the potential to improve the stability of this position from year to year by effective management of the combined Gloucestershire and Royal Forest of Dean Colleges.

We also feel that without bringing the two Colleges together in a formal reorganisation we run the risk of not being able to deliver a significant contribution to improvements in 14-19 and employer based provision that are needed in the area. The offer will continue to diminish for all learner groups. We have concluded that the creation of a new combined college would provide the basis for increased capacity to respond appropriately to local needs.

We know that in proceeding with our merger there will be other risks that we need to manage. It is important that recruitment is maintained and increased over the period of transition. We will continue to maintain and develop student programmes, student support services and the quality and standards of the existing curriculum.

Retaining the commitment and support of staff is another significant factor in making the merger a success. The project to create a merged college will provide opportunities for a wide range of teaching and support staff to work together. Positive team-building through new developments and the sharing of good practice will enable a thriving culture for the merged college, with the prospect of an improved working environment as the resources are updated.

The process of creating a merged college is a long one and we are very much aware that in seeking to provide first class facilities local residents need to be informed of developments. We are committed to continuing the process of public engagement and consultation so that their views will be taken into account.
9. How to Respond

Comments on the draft proposal are invited through a consultation being managed by the Skills Funding Agency as part of its statutory role in college mergers. The Agency will analyse the responses received, publish a consultation report and ask us to take the responses into account when writing our final merger proposal.

All the consultation information and links are available at the Skills Funding Agency website at: http://skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/providers/allthelatest/consultations

A secure online consultation is available though Survey Monkey at: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/proposedmergerconsultationRFDC_GC

Or, if you prefer, responses can be made in writing or by email to:

Geoff Russell
Chief Executive of Skills Funding
Skills Funding Agency, Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road, Cheylesmore
Coventry
CV1 2WT

The consultation starts on 14 September 2010 and the deadline for responding is 14 October 2010.

The consultation report will be published at: http://skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/providers/allthelatest/consultations within two weeks of the end of the consultation period.

If you have any problems using the online survey, please use the contact details above or telephone 02476 825791 to let the Skills Funding Agency know.
Annex A

Background of the Colleges
Recent Ofsted inspection reports provide a summary of each College. These have been reproduced and updated below.

Gloucestershire College
Gloucestershire College is by some way the largest of the County’s colleges. It primarily serves the major urban areas of Cheltenham and Gloucester but also attracts learners from all corners of Gloucestershire and beyond. The proportion of the College’s learners from black minority ethnic groups at 11% is well above that in the local population. Although Gloucestershire is essentially a relatively affluent county, both Cheltenham and Gloucester have wards in the top 10% of most deprived areas in the country.

In 2007 the College completed a major transformation of its previously dispersed estate, resulting in two major new campuses, the Cheltenham campus, completed in 2002 and the Gloucester campus, completed in 2007. In addition the College has two specialist construction centres and three high street ‘Do IT’ Centres in Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury. A new skills centre has been built in Tewkesbury in conjunction with three schools – Tewkesbury, Chipping Camden and Cleeve.

In recent years the College has reduced its extensive community programme in order to concentrate on the Government priorities of 14-19, basic skills and the Leitch agenda. The College’s mission statement ‘Transforming lives and supporting business’ reflects the focus of the re-branded ‘Gloucestershire College’.

Most schools in the College’s catchment area have sixth forms and as a result the College faces significant competition for students at the end of their GCSE courses. The prior attainment of learners attending the College is well below the national average, although the GCSE results of school leavers in Gloucestershire are above the national average. The College’s contextual value added scores are good. In 2008/09 there were around 2,800 learners aged 16-18 at the College, accounting for over half of full-time equivalent learners (FTEs) on long courses. Almost half of learners aged 16-18 study courses at Level 3.

The College works closely with three major schools partnerships. It is extensively involved in provision for learners aged 14-16 with around 350 learners, young apprenticeships, and the Diplomas. The College also receives around 80 year 10 and year 11 learners who, for a variety of reasons, no longer attend school. The College offers qualifications from pre-entry level to degree level via a variety of study modes, including online and distance learning courses. Recent years have seen a significant increase in the range and volume of Level 1 and 2 vocational courses. The College runs courses with substantial numbers in almost all of the sector subject areas.

Gloucestershire College has close links with its three university partners. It teaches a range of Higher National and Foundation Degree qualifications. The College is a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in Information Technology (IT) services. The College has a work-based learning contract of around 600 learners, mainly in engineering and construction trades, as well as a significant Train to Gain contract. Work with employers, and in particular through the apprenticeship programme has been a key feature of the College in recent years. In 2009/10 its overseas income also exceeded £1 million.
Royal Forest of Dean College
The Royal Forest of Dean College was established as a tertiary college in 1985. It is a small college situated in a rural area of Gloucestershire with a low population density. The Forest of Dean has a poor transport infrastructure. The majority of businesses in the area are classified as very small to medium sized.

The participation rate of those under 19 in the Forest of Dean includes 72% in post-16 education, 11% in work-based learning and 9% in employment with training. Of the population of working age 6.4% have no qualifications, which is lower than the national figure of 9.6%, and Gloucestershire at 7.2%. Six secondary schools, two with sixth forms, are located near the College. In three of the schools the percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs grades A* to C (including mathematics and English) is well below the national average.

The majority of the College’s provision is based at the main site in Coleford; the rest is located at a site in Mitcheldean. The College also provides adult and community learning in numerous sites in the locality. The College offers courses in 14 of the 15 sector subject areas. The largest numbers of enrolments are in preparation for life and work and health, public services and care. Enrolments in engineering, leisure, travel and tourism, history, philosophy and theology and social sciences are low. In 2008/09, of approximately 4,000 learners, 230 are aged 14 to 16, around 1,500 are aged 16 to 18, and the rest are adults. Most learners are on part-time courses, with 21% on full-time programmes. Around 60% of learners are female. Approximately 1% of learners are from minority ethnic backgrounds, which reflects the small proportion in the local community.

The College provides a range of programmes from pre-entry to Level 3, with some Level 4 provision. It includes provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, provision for learners excluded, or at risk of exclusion, from local schools, as well as post-16 provision for those not in employment, education or training (NEET). The College also offers work-based learning provision; mainly apprentices in hairdressing and construction.

The College’s mission is: ‘To inspire and enable all our learners to achieve their full potential and to provide the skills and education needed for a thriving economic, social and cultural environment’.
Annex B

Merger Criteria

1. The proposal is likely to address the needs of learners and employers

2. The proposal is likely to increase opportunity for the learner to exercise choice and encourage diversity in the education and training available

3. The proposal is likely to increase local participation rates and result in improved quality and success

4. The proposal is likely to develop innovation and improve access to learning for the community

5. The proposal ensures the embedding of all aspects of equality and diversity

6. The proposal is likely to promote effective community cohesion through community presence and representation within governance structures

7. The proposal is likely to provide better value for money.
Annex C

Glossary of Terms

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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KPMG</td>
<td>A very large accountancy firm with expertise in education</td>
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<tr>
<td>RFDC</td>
<td>Royal Forest of Dean College</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILT</td>
<td>Information Learning Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activ Boards</td>
<td>Teaching boards that can be used as chalk boards, overhead projector screens or for receiving TV</td>
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<tr>
<td>TUPE</td>
<td>Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations which are regulations that protect employees’ rights affected by mergers and takeovers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills Funding Agency</td>
<td>A government funding body for payment of funds to colleges and training providers of adult learning and apprenticeships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ofsted</td>
<td>The Office for Standards in Education, a government body that regulates standards of teaching in schools and colleges</td>
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