Workstream 7 Space Utilisation – Summary Paper

Exec Summary

1. This document outlines the work undertaken as part of Workstream 7 of the College Infrastructure Investment Plan, on space utilisation. It aimed to develop a better understanding of how space is used on college estates, including how to define space types, measure utilisation of space and support the evolution of a future college model and approach by learning from the university sector, and wider Scottish public sector.

2. SFC convened a working group of representatives and experts from Scottish colleges to support the work and gathered data from the sector in the form of a questionnaire designed to find out more about how they currently measure use of space on campus.

3. The short life working group also undertook an assessment of the Guidance on Effective Management of Space in Scottish Colleges (GEMS). This guidance is now out of date, and the workstream considered how to update it for the future, including whether to commission an external organisation to create a new version. This questionnaire found that 12 institutions partially measure space utilisation, reporting that they measure 'a proportion' of their space.

4. A key part of the workstream was to develop a new series of space type definitions, to update those in GEMS and streamline the ones currently used in Navigator. The alternatives proposed in this annex combine those currently included in Navigator with the simpler versions included in the Guidance on Effective Management of Space for Scotland's Colleges document.

Recommendations for SFC

5. The Scottish Funding Council should procure consultancy support to publish a revised and updated version of the Guidance on Effective Management of Space at Scotland's Colleges.

6. The Scottish Funding Council should create a hub on its website with information about space utilisation.

7. The Scottish Funding Council should facilitate the updating the space type definitions on Navigator to further simplify them and align with those used in GEMS. The new iteration of GEMS will also align with these definitions.

Recommendations for Scotland's colleges

8. These are recommendations for colleges in the interim until a new version of the Guidance on the Effective Management of Space at Scotland's Colleges is published. They are not compulsory and are based on recommendations made to colleges in GEMS,

and discussions with the Space Utilisation Short Life Working Group.

9. From GEMS, in order to maximise space utilisation:

    - Colleges should have a central room booking system, with space that is centrally managed.
    - Colleges should aim to timetable a full 35 hour week to make best use of space available, even if this falls outside the normal Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 hours when allocating rooms.
    - Colleges should have a systematic room database, with information about capacity and capability of each room.

10. Until a new version of GEMS is developed to outline how colleges should measure and report on space utilisation, colleges could consider using the method outlined below. This was developed by Glasgow Kelvin College.

Introduction and background

11. Scottish Colleges do not routinely or consistently measure utilisation of space on campus. Space utilisation data is critical to assessing investment for future capital investment across the public sector in Scotland, and the College Infrastructure Investment Plan identifies the need to implement a consistent method of measuring utilisation across the college sector.

12. This work is ongoing but has made significant progress over the last six months. Workstream 7 of the CIIP aimed to develop a better understanding of how space is used on college estates, including how to define space types, measure utilisation of space and support the evolution of a future college model and approach by learning from the university sector, and wider Scottish public sector.

13. Baseline 2024 identified significant gaps in how space data and utilisation were interpreted and reported by colleges. Baseline 2026 made some key changes to the space types colleges were required to report on in order to simplify the process and improve the quality of the data. However, the college estate data baselining exercise was designed to be flexible and iterative and will change again in future data collection rounds as a more consistent approach to measurement is developed.

14. Improved space utilisation data will support college sector transformation, and lead to more targeted and strategic capital investment. Net zero and climate change, digital infrastructure, new modes of educational delivery and changing fiscal pressures will all put pressure on Scotland's colleges to find new modes of operation. Robust, consistent and reliance space utilisation data will help them navigate the future choices they, SFC, and the Scottish Government will have to make about the future of estates.

15. For the purpose of this workstream and elsewhere in this document, space utilisation is defined as: a measure of how rooms and spaces are being used in terms of how and when they are in use and how many people are in them. Includes how often (frequency)

and how many people (occupancy).

Workstream 7 Space Utilisation

16. Workstream 7 began in April 2026. It aimed to develop early recommendations for measuring space utilisation in the college sector and enhance understanding of how this is currently measured at colleges.

17. SFC convened a working group of representatives and experts from Scottish colleges to support the work, and this group have been invaluable in developing the thinking and recommendations below.

18. The sector took part in a questionnaire designed by SFC to find out more about how they currently measure use of space on campus. The results of this questionnaire are displayed in more detail below.

19. The short life working group also undertook an assessment of the Guidance on Effective Management of Space in Scottish Colleges (GEMS), which was guidance commissioned by SFC in 2009 to provide recommendations to the sector about how to measure, manage and use space efficiently. This guidance is now out of date, and the workstream considered how to update it for the future, including whether to commission an external organisation to create a new version. More information on this is below.

20. The short life working group also made an assessment of the space type definitions found in GEMS and on the Baseline 2026 Navigator tool. It compared the two sets of space type definitions and developed a third set of proposed definitions for the future, which combine the two.

State of the sector

Measuring Space Utilisation

21. 12 institutions partially measure space utilisation, reporting that they measure ‘a proportion’ of their space. UHI Argyll and UHI Shetland are the only two institutions who report fully measuring their space. The other 7 colleges do not measure utilisation at the current time, with 4 planning to do so in the future, and 3 not planning to do so in the future.

22. For those institutions who do measure some utilisation already, the responsibility for data collection and reporting is usually shared between estates teams, timetabling teams, and curriculum teams too.

23. Most colleges who do measure utilisation do so using timetabling data, and measure planned, rather than actual, utilisation. 10 colleges also use a combination of observational surveys or attendance data to measure actual utilisation as well.

24. It varies across institution whether timetabling data is centralised or managed by specific departments.

Data routinely collected for teaching spaces

Data Type	Number of Institutions collecting
Room type (general classroom, ICT, specialist)	17
Room capacity (number of seats/workplaces)	17
Planned room booking	17
Actual attendance/headcount	11
Frequency of use	7
Occupancy rate	5

25. To accurately measure utilisation of space on campus, colleges should collect each of these types of data. SFC will consider what support it could provide to colleges to ensure they are all able to capture this information.

GEMS

26. The Guidance for Effective Space Management was commissioned by SFC in 2009 and the work was completed by AMA Alexi Marmot Associates. It aims to support colleges to identify appropriate space for their operations, and to use that space well. The guidance provides a framework and a series of tools to assist Scotland's colleges to develop efficient and effective estates. Guidance is advisory, not mandatory.

27. Key features include:

- A space management process map.
- Clear definitions of all space measurements.
- Overall target space norms for strategic use.
- A proposed proportional split of functions across the estate.
- Proposed space standards for different types of teaching, learning and office spaces.
- Realistic utilisation targets for teaching and learning spaces.
- GEMS calculator for calculating space requirements based on on-site student activity and utilisation of existing space.
- Recommended performance indicators for monitoring space use over time.
- Overview of relevant space management tools.

28. Crucially, the GEMS document was developed and published before Scotland's colleges were reclassified as central government bodies by the Office for National Statistics. It

also makes reference to Weighted Student Unit of Measurement (WSUMs) to calculate space usage norms, which SFC no longer uses to calculate college funding. This means that, although there is still useful guidance and advice in GEMS, it is no longer completely relevant for the modern Scottish college.

29. For this reason, SFC and the short life working group determined that a new version of GEMS should be developed. This work has not yet been commissioned by the text below outlines some of the strengths and limitations of the current GEMS document identified by colleges, SFC and the short life working group.

30. When asked in the questionnaire completed by colleges in June 2026, 13 institutions are familiar with the Guidance on Effective Management of Space for Scotland's Colleges. 8 said they were not familiar with GEMS. (The remaining colleges did not answer this question). Of those who answered that they were familiar with GEMS, the way they use it varies. Some colleges reported referencing GEMS but not actively using it. It is also used to inform estate strategies, help colleges benchmark, and to support space utilisation surveys.

Assessment of GEMS

Strengths of GEMS

31. The space type definitions in GEMS are clear, simple and easy to apply. This is in contrast to the definitions on Navigator which were reported to be overly specific and colleges were unclear on what space type definitions to apply where.

32. GEMS provides a consistent and clear way to measure space utilisation, the problem for colleges is the data collection to do that measurement.

33. Space standards, utilisation calculation and space norms were all identified as particularly useful in GEMS in the questionnaire completed by colleges in June 2026. The future version of the guidance should include these aspects.

Weaknesses of GEMS:

34. It is 'guidance' only and not mandatory. The space utilisation short life working group recommended that any future publication by SFC on space utilisation contained mandatory measurement and reporting requirements to ensure consistency between colleges.

35. GEMS does not make clear the benefit of measuring space utilisation to colleges. Future SFC policy on this should be explicit about why colleges should measure utilisation and why it is useful.

36. GEMS is out of date in several ways:

    - Most significantly it does not place necessary importance on digital learning spaces. A new version should include digitally enabled learning spaces as an explicit space type because this is where pressures for space are on college estates.

- It also does not provide guidance on how to measure space utilisation in a post-COVID, hybrid learning environment or hybrid working by staff. This is something the space utilisation short life working group discussed a lot but did not come to a concrete conclusion on. It was also reflected in the results of the questionnaire completed by colleges. This is something that SFC would include in a scope for the development of a new version of GEMS in the future.
- Two colleges reported that GEMS standards are hard to apply in rural settings.
- One respondent said that the guidance doesn't advise how to capture data and what data to capture.

Key next steps

37. SFC will undertake further work to identify a short list of consultancies or companies who could develop a new version of GEMS for the tertiary education sector.

38. SFC will develop a scope for the new version based on the assessment of GEMS above. This will include:

- Consideration of what aspects of the new version of GEMS to make mandatory.
- Whether it wants to set targets for space utilisation (as GEMS does).
- Whether it wants to include recommendations for *how* colleges should allocate space, as well as defining how it should be measured.

Definitions

39. The table below shows space type definitions considered by the Space Utilisation Short Life Working Group. The proposed alternatives combine those currently included in Navigator with the simpler versions included in the Guidance on Effective Management of Space for Scotland's Colleges document.

40. Colleges would not be required to report space utilisation figures for all the space types defined. Those which would be mandatory in the next iteration of Navigator are marked with an asterisk.

Navigator Definitions	GEMS Definitions	Proposed alternative definitions
Non-teaching space		
Administration and support.	**Other usable spaces**: all other usable space including staff workspace,	***Non-teaching usable space**: all usable space including staff workspace, cafeterias,
Refectory/café.		

Third Party Space.	cafeterias, reception, general storage etc.	reception, general storage etc.
Atrium/Auditorium.		
No equivalent covering these categories.	**Core**: 'non-usable' space including vertical circulation, WCs, plant, and internal structures.	***Circulation and Core Space**: primary horizontal circulation (corridors and routes to fire escape); WCs, plant, and internal structures.
No equivalent covering these categories.	**Circulation**: primary horizontal circulation (corridors and routes to fi e escape).	
Changing and washroom facilities.	**No equivalent (would be classed as core or circulation)**	**No equivalent (would be classed as core or circulation)**
General non functional space.	**No equivalent (would be classed as core or circulation)**	**No equivalent (would be classed as core or circulation)**
Teaching Space		
No equivalent	**Teaching**: A general definition to cover all usable space dedicated to classrooms, workshops and associated storage.	***Teaching Space**: A general definition to cover all usable space dedicated to classrooms, workshops and associated storage. Includes the following:
General teaching space.	**No equivalent.**	**General Teaching Space**: General purpose teaching spaces.
Laboratories.	**No equivalent.**	**Laboratories**: Laboratory space with specialised equipment.
Teaching workshop.	**No equivalent.**	**Workshop**: Other teaching space used for hands-on, practical learning. Includes training salons, hospitality,
Agricultural space.	**No equivalent.**	
Sports.	**No equivalent.**	

Hospitality space.	**No equivalent.**	sports, media, agricultural and construction and childcare workshop spaces.
Salon space.	**No equivalent.**	
Media space.	**No equivalent.**	
Specialised space.	**No equivalent.**	**Other specialised teaching space**: Any other specialised teaching or learning area not covered by the above.
Study.	**Learning**: usable space dedicated to self-directed and peer-to-peer learning;	***Digital Learning Spaces**: Learning space with computing ability, either banks of computers or laptops.

Recommendations

41. The recommendations outlined below are the culmination of Workstream 7 of the College Infrastructure Investment Plan. They are accompanied by the associated recommended definitions outlined above and hosted on the SFC website [link to definitions page].

42. These recommendations are designed to be followed in the interim until the Scottish Funding Council publishes a new iteration of the Guidance on Effective Management of Space at Scotland's Colleges, which will be updated in due course.

Recommendations for the Scottish Funding Council

43. The Scottish Funding Council should procure consultancy support to publish a revised and updated version of the Guidance on Effective Management of Space at Scotland's Colleges. This would include guidance for colleges on how to measure space utilisation, recommendations on how colleges should allocate space and targets for utilisation, as the previous version of this guidance did.

44. The Scottish Funding Council should create a hub on its website with information about space utilisation. GEMS used to be hosted on the SFC website and SFC should provide easy access information to colleges in the interim until a new iteration of GEMS is developed and published.

45. The Scottish Funding Council should facilitate the updating the space type definitions on Navigator to further simplify them and align with those used in GEMS. The new iteration of GEMS will also align with these definitions.

Recommendations for Scotland's colleges

46. These are recommendations for colleges in the interim until a new version of the Guidance on the Effective Management of Space at Scotland's Colleges is published. They are not compulsory and are based on recommendations made to colleges in GEMS, and discussions with the Space Utilisation Short Life Working Group.

47. From GEMS, in order to maximise space utilisation:

- Colleges should have a central room booking system, with space that is centrally managed.
- Colleges should aim to timetable a full 35 hour week to make best use of space available, even if this falls outside the normal Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 hours when allocating rooms.
- Colleges should have a systematic room database, with information about capacity and capability of each room.

48. Until a new version of GEMS is developed to outline how colleges should measure and report on space utilisation, colleges could consider using the How To Guide published on the SFC website, developed in partnership with the Space Utilisation Short life Working Group and representatives from Ayrshire College and Glasgow Kelvin College.