

City centre MSP calls on Chancellor to fund university supercomputer in budget

Edinburgh Central MSP Angus Robertson, has written to Ian Murray MP, the Secretary of State for Scotland, all other Edinburgh Labour MPs, and the UK Science Secretary Peter Kyle.

In the letter he appeals to them to obtain funding from Chancellor Rachel Reeves for the world-leading super computer which was to be housed at the University of Edinburgh.

When the funding for the exascale computer was announced by Rishi Sunak's government only last year, the government said then: "Exascale is the next frontier in computing power, where systems are built to carry out extremely complex functions with increased speed and precision. This in turn enables researchers to accelerate their work into some of the most pressing challenges we face, including the development of new drugs, and advances in nuclear fusion to produce potentially limitless clean low-carbon energy.

"The exascale system hosted at the University of Edinburgh will be able to carry out these complicated workloads while also supporting critical research into AI safety and development, as the UK seeks to safely harness its potential to improve lives across the country."

Labour cancelled funding

Shortly after the election the UK Government cut the £800 million investment in the Exascale Supercomputer during the summer. Officials at the UK Government Department for Science, Information and Technology said then that investing in the supercomputer made 'little strategic sense,'. In the statement they added that the UK Government was "committed to building technology infrastructure that delivers growth and opportunity for people across the UK".

At the time of the announcement, Mr Robertson who is also Culture Secretary, said: "Labour has made a hugely consequential decision early on that misunderstands and undermines the priorities of Scotland's world-leading data, AI, and tech sector.

"It's clear Labour's desperation to cut government funding is undermining the economy."

Since then, the Chancellor has outlined how new money will be available for "borrow-to-invest" projects such as this. Robertson says Edinburgh Labour MPs should be pushing to obtain some of this money to reverse the £800 million cut.

Letter

In his letter to the UK Science Secretary, Edinburgh Labour MPs Chris Murray, Scott Arthur, Tracy Gilbert, and Ian Murray, Mr Robertson said: "Following news that "borrow-to-invest" funding will be created in this week's budget, I write to appeal for your help advocating to the Chancellor to provide investment for the building of the Exascale Computer at Edinburgh University. While I appreciate very difficult funding decisions have to be made, the choice to cut £800 million by the UK Government to Edinburgh's globally leading institutions was the wrong one.

“The Chancellor has said the change of public-sector debt measurement will free up investment to ‘grow our economy and bring jobs and growth to Britain.’ This provides an opportunity to back the ambitious Exascale project that will ensure the University, city and country’s place as a global leader in supercomputing and related data, tech, and AI fields.

“Able to perform one billion billion calculations each second, the Exascale Computer would provide high-performance computing capability for key research and industry projects across the UK. Exascale is aimed at helping researchers model all aspects of the world, test scientific theories and improve products and services in areas such as artificial intelligence, drug discovery, climate change, astrophysics and advanced engineering. The consequential economic benefits are astronomic.

“Having been contacted by numerous stakeholders following the cut, the opportunity lost at the project’s cancellation is clear. It would simply not be possible for the UK to be a science superpower without such a supercomputer.

“As you are aware, more broadly, our city and region have a huge part to play in all facets of AI, data, tech, and related fields. Years of investment from Scottish and UK Governments, local authorities, businesses, academic institutions, and more, have solidified Edinburgh as a crucible of future technologies, research and economic growth. The Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal is well on the way to establishing Edinburgh as the data capital of Europe, along with the creation of 21,000 jobs.

“We must keep the momentum going to build on this work, and investing in the Exascale computer is key to doing this. Following the new funds being made available by the Chancellor, I would be most grateful for your help securing the Exascale supercomputer investment and remain available to

assist in any way I can.”



Angus Robertson Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution,
External Affairs and Culture.