

Focus North Programme Manager Update

17th of April 2023

General

During 2022 the Caithness and North Sutherland regeneration partnership underwent a major review. This remit of this review was to: -

- Recognise the significant changes in economic position in the region since the inception of the partnership.
- Seek to understand and reflect stakeholder opinions and update the remit to better reflect renewed regional opportunities and ambition.
- Re-engage and reinvigorate the partners' approach to the partnership
- Clarify partnership roles and responsibilities, reviewing the structure and operation of the partnership.
- Develop a revised programme approach.
- Identify resources needed.

This review was undertaken under the guidance of the new Independent Chair of the Executive Board with support from an external consultancy. The process consisted of a series of workshops, attended by key personnel from all the partnership organisations supported by extensive stakeholder engagement. During this process, amongst other important stakeholders, local elected representatives were consulted, and the final renewed approach was formally endorsed by both the Caithness and Sutherland Area committees of the Highland Council.

This process resulted in the adoption of a new identity for the partnership – **Focus North** as well as changing the remit and approach. This new identity is memorable, states partner's intentions and asks others to focus on the opportunities in the North of mainland Scotland. It compliments existing initiatives such as Venture North and is descriptive but not prescriptive about the geographic boundary – the latter being something that came across strongly from local stakeholders.

Since the last DSG Socioeconomic Subgroup the review process has been concluded with a formal Focus North launch event held on the 8th of February 2023 the Weigh Inn hotel in Thurso, attended by 154 delegates. Since that point detailed Key Performance Indicators setting has commenced.

Whilst the main goal areas have been agreed - set around economic growth, people and communities partnership effectiveness and sustainability, specific key performance indicators are being developed as the initial active initiatives are being defined.

Agreed organisational approach and responsibilities.

- A new partnership charter was agreed¹ which outlines how partners will work together.
- One of the key goals within the strategic operational policy developed is to focus on the performance of the partnership in achieving its stated aims.
- The partnership has been expanded to include the university of the Highlands and Islands (represented on the Focus North Executive Board by the principal of UHI North Highland)
- Chairmanship of the Focus North Advisory Board has been handed to the elected leader of Highland Council

Agreed strategy and goals

¹ See Focus North Partnership Charter - Appendix 1

- Partners agreed: - a clearly defined purpose, agreed values, three-year vision and goals and initial strategic objectives².
- Building on stakeholder feedback and the agreed goals, a Masterplan has been developed³
- An action programme has been developed, and the initiatives identified are setting the revised resourcing needs identified in this document.

Focus North Active Initiatives - Programme implementation.

Prior to this comprehensive review the partnership had been focussed on identifying and developing project opportunities and seeking to develop these. For many years the barrier to increasing employment in the region was the lack of substantial project opportunities and most of the partnership effort was in seeking to develop and attract more. Infrastructure and support activities were perceived as a secondary priority and only when these were seen to be a barrier to a specific project were activities to overcome them instigated. The significant opportunities developing in the region reinforced by stakeholder consultation and surveys undertaken as part of the Focus North launch demonstrate that this balance has changed. The barrier to growing employment and diversifying the economy in the short and medium term is now less about project opportunities and more about other factors. The lack of skilled personnel, in particular, needs to be addressed. To maximise local benefits from the opportunities attracting, training, and retaining the talent is vital. To facilitate the growth of the workforce, infrastructure, transport, and accommodation issues become increasingly important to overcome. The new approach therefore places much more emphasis upon overcoming these restraining factors, whilst continuing to pursue new Inward investment and large projects. Without both strands being equally targeted economic diversification and growth in employment is likely to be constrained by lack of personnel or other issues.

Summarising the stakeholder engagement including discussions with local employers identifies three recurring themes in order of priority: -

1. Lack of skilled personnel (with housing of personnel being a significant repeating issue)
2. Lack of or poor broadband connectivity
3. Transport for employees

The priority order of items two and three vary from employer to employer depending on the nature of the business and location.

Item 1 - Work has been initiated to look at skills and talent attraction issues with the support of Jacobs, led by Caithness Chamber of Commerce. An initial workshop to scope the approach was held on 6th Feb, with several individual consultations factfinding and research to establish baseline needs and issues held with multiple stakeholders since. The output from this exercise will be a detailed work plan agreed between the partners involved, anticipated to be completed during May.

Item 2 - The surveys undertaken for the Focus North launch event continue to highlight the significant concerns from businesses and individuals around digital connectivity. Of the attendees who completed the survey, 75 % believed this to be either a high or very high risk to the region's development. This is reinforced by discussions with many local stakeholders and businesses. A proposal to develop an approach to enhance the local digital economy is being developed. An initial information gathering phase will inform the formation of a short-duration action group to create and implement an action plan.

Item 3 – Transport requirements in the region are evolving. The need to decarbonise transport means moving to low carbon transport methods - electric vehicles, and potentially hydrogen

² See Focus North Strategic Operational Policy - Appendix 2

³ See Focus North Masterplan <https://www.focusnorth.scot/wp-content/uploads//Focus-North-Masterplan-19-Apr-23-v9.pdf>

powered trains, aircraft, and heavy goods vehicles including buses. At the same time travel patterns have changed - Dounreay's requirement to transport its workforce, college student movements, and more people working from home have all changed since COVID-19. Future public transport arrangements need to take into account this evolving picture.

Transport is a complex issue and multiple strands of activity are underway amongst partners that are being coordinated through Focus North. A demand study and an approach to develop alternative innovative approaches is being led by the Chamber of Commerce, liaising with Highland council's net zero and transport teams, whilst at the same time exploring how this can be supported through the Scottish Government's place-based pilot scheme. Highland council have also commenced consultations updating its Local Transport Strategy, which sets out how it will manage and modernise the transport network across the region in the coming years. The Case for Change is the first stage in this process and is about gathering evidence and this consultation seeks views on it. The full Case for Change Report and questionnaire are available at: -

https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/download/2233/local_transport_strategy_case_for_change

Focus North Regional Projects Updates

Continuing to engage with West of Orkney Offshore windfarm and Pentland Floating Offshore Wind Farm. West of Orkney has already led a £900,000 investment to support a STEM initiative at University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) to promote careers in science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM). The expansion of this provision includes funding for two full-time STEM coordinators located in Caithness & Sutherland and Orkney.

The initiative is the first co-funded project to be announced following the launch of the Scottish Offshore Wind Energy Council's collaborative framework charter in May, where ScotWind developers committed to working together for the benefit of Scotland as a whole. It is also the first project to be supported under UHI's new sustainability fund, which is being established to help accelerate the region's transition to a green and sustainable economy.

Spaceport Sutherland continues to develop with expectation of first launch during 2024.

Focus North Organisational update

To progress these priority actions, it has been agreed that a business development manager will join the Focus North support team. After an open recruitment process Focus North Business Development Manager has been recruited and will start in May.

Peter Faccenda

Focus North Programme Manager
18 Apr 2023

**FOCUS
NORTH
↑**

DRIVING OPPORTUNITIES
THAT SHAPE OUR FUTURE

Focus North Partnership Charter (v1 Agreed 6 Sept 22)

Our Intent

To deliver sustainable economic opportunities in the North of Mainland Scotland.

- We recognise this region as an important and globally distinctive centre of opportunity.
- We will develop an ambitious masterplan, aligned to Partner goals, and suitably resource its delivery.
- We will measure success based on agreed economic measures and community benefits.

Collaborate and Trust

To be a dynamic Partnership, committed to a common vision and shared goals.

- We will adapt our Partnership in response to need and opportunity and do so with agility and efficiency.
- We commit to taking responsibility and accountability for our actions.
- We value individual contributions towards collective strength.
- We will be honest and transparent with each other.

Act as One team

To build trust and respect in all we do.

- Honouring our commitments to each other and our communities.
- Actively listening and understanding our differences.
- Aligning our priorities and playing to our strengths.
- Deploying the right delivery resource to achieve success.

Appendix 2 – Strategic Operational Policy

| <p>FOCUS NORTH ↑ <small>DRIVING OPPORTUNITIES THAT SHAPE OUR FUTURE</small></p> <p>Focus North Strategic Operational Policy: 2023 – 2026 (v1 Agreed 6 Sept 22)</p> | | |
|---|--|--|
| Our Purpose | 3-Yr Vision | Strategic Objectives |
| <p>Driving the opportunities that shape <i>Our future</i>.</p> | <p>Our Partnership makes the <i>difference</i> by growing the economic prosperity of Our communities.</p> | <p>#1: Masterplan Publish an agreed plan which is current, has measurable goals and time scales with identified owners.</p> <p>#2: People All partners provide relevant and empowered representatives supported by the full capability of their parent organisation</p> <p>#3: Funding Attract partner, public and private sector investment to deliver the masterplan.</p> <p>#4: Impact Deliver the masterplan, measure progress, and demonstrate results.</p> <p>#5: Profile Promote the region and the Partnership’s objectives, activities, and impact.</p> |
| Our Core Values | 3-Yr Goals | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ambitious for <i>Our future</i>: Being creative and determined in exploiting the art of the possible in every opportunity. Being <i>One team</i>: Continuously building trust whilst respecting our differences, within and outside the Partnership. Planning as <i>One Team</i>: Being open and honest in envisioning our future by setting ambitious strategic objectives and goals, appropriately resourced to succeed Being proud to deliver: Do what we say we will do and hold each other to account; don’t dither - Deliver. Communicating as <i>One</i>: Shared consistent narrative, demonstrating a commitment to the importance and value of the Partnership. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Economic Growth People/Communities Partnership Effectiveness Sustainability | |

