

# Focus North Programme Manager Update

10 July 2023

## General

Following the review and relaunch of the partnership under the Focus North identity completed in February 2023, the work of producing a detailed action plan continues.

Barriers to growing employment and diversifying the economy in the short and medium term include the lack of skilled personnel. Infrastructure, transport, and accommodation to allow growth in the workforce have become increasingly important to overcome. The current approach therefore places emphasis upon overcoming these restraining factors, whilst continuing to pursue new inward investment and project opportunities.

The plan consists of a series of top-level initiatives with individual actions identified and allocated to relevant responsible people.

## Focus North active initiatives - programme implementation

As outlined previously, stakeholder feedback primarily referred to three key blocks to inward investment: access to skilled personnel, transport for employment, broadband/digital connectivity.

Therefore many of our immediate actions relate to those three priority areas, with a short overview provided below:

### Skills and talent attraction

Development to identify initial key actions has been initiated with the support of Jacobs, led by Caithness Chamber of Commerce. Jacobs is undertaking this work pro bono as part of their socioeconomic commitment to the area. A workshop to review initial findings was held on 12<sup>th</sup> June. Numerous individual stakeholder consultations coupled with wider factfinding, and research were undertaken to establish baseline needs and issues. The output from this exercise will be a detailed work plan agreed between the partners involved. A final report and agreed action plan will be included in the programme from later this month (July).

We are also exploring the possibility of a shared apprenticeship model to create a pipeline of skills to support the Just Transition. This is led by the Chamber of Commerce, with our new Business Development Manager Nicola Sinclair providing support. Nicola is currently looking at the costs to run such a scheme, and investigating potential funding streams.

### Transport for employment

Transport requirements in the region are a complex and evolving issue. The need to decarbonise transport means adopting low carbon transport methods: electric vehicles; hybrid hydrogen-electric powered trains and aircraft; alternative fuelled or powered heavy goods vehicles and buses; and new fuel types for sea vessels, with hydrogen and ammonia both being discussed. Whilst these needs are not unique to our region, unusually, all of them are directly relevant. Notwithstanding the need to decarbonise transport, regional travel patterns have changed. Dounreay, other employers, and the local college have changed working patterns with more people working and studying remotely. Future public transport arrangements need to consider this evolving picture.

Multiple strands of activity and influencing factors are being considered, including: changing transport demand from Dounreay; the inclusion of transport as a priority in the Scottish Government place-based pilot programme; a recent Highland Council study on the zero-emission bus transition scheme trialled in the Cairngorms, and the council's consultations on its local transport strategy 'A case for change'.

Our first action is to map current and potential demand to inform alternative transport solutions. To that end, Focus North and its partners have commissioned a study from Urban Foresight consultancy. The study is funded through the Caithness place-based demonstrator project, Dounreay and Kyle of Sutherland development trust.

This type of study is likely to take several months to complete and report, but it is felt that the evidence base created is vital for decision making for next steps.

### Digital economy

The surveys undertaken for the Focus North launch event highlighted 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. Whilst discussions with many local stakeholders and businesses have indicated some issues there are surprisingly few examples where the principal barrier is digital connectivity. Digital connectivity continues to improve through ongoing local development and initiatives such as Scottish Government's R100, so there is no proposal for action under our programme, other than signposting and information sharing. A 'how to improve digital connectivity' fact sheet was created with HIE's digital support team to support the 'Caithness jobs and how to get them' event. I staffed a Focus North 'digital economy' stand at this event in as part of the fact-finding approach. This fact sheet has been posted on the Focus North Website and has been downloaded more than 600 times.

The concern emerging from the factfinding phase of this initiative is how underdeveloped the digital economy is locally in comparison to other parts of the country. Local IT support capacity is small, there are few 'digital' businesses, there is a shortage of skilled personnel for those businesses that do exist locally, and many non-digital businesses are underutilising digital tools. This offers opportunities to enhance visibility of digital benefits to conventional businesses and seek to attract or develop local digital business capacity and skills. Digital businesses are more location-independent, can develop quickly, and there are still multiple markets which offer opportunities. These factors make this type of business ideal to attract and develop in locations like Caithness and North Sutherland.

Focus North has identified a group of key stakeholders, including local service users and providers and industry experts. We are in the process of arranging a workshop to facilitate discussions and exchange of ideas, and UHI has agreed to host this event in the latter half of August. Nicola Sinclair is also supporting this strand of activity.

## **Promotion and awareness raising**

Using capacity available through 3x1 we continue to raise the profile of the region and Focus North:

### Just Transition

In support of programme development such as the transport work strand a thought leadership piece was produced and published in the Press and Journal.

A proposed just transition pilot area proposal, originally developed for Richard Lochhead as a response to his visit as Just Transition minister has been refreshed. This has been submitted to the new Just Transition Minister Mairi McAllen – a holding response has been received.

### Press

3x1 has secured press coverage on recent internal developments and achievements, including the recruitment of our new business development manager and Focus North winning the socioeconomic award at the NDA Awards.

### In development

Further press articles on topics such as future employment trends in our region - particularly environmental science-based careers - space industry opportunities in support of the development of Sutherland Spaceport and others will be published to further raise awareness of the regional opportunities.

Nicola Sinclair is doing a Q&A in the August issue of Dounreay staff magazine, to raise awareness of Focus North and its programme priorities.

### General communications activity

Attended NDA Innovation and Technology Roadshow at Strathclyde University on 28 June.

Attended Dounreay Stakeholder event 8<sup>th</sup> June and presented to 5 groups of interested supply chain companies.

Awareness raising activities are in planning for Holyrood and Westminster stakeholders for later in the year.

Discussions with 3x1 on impact measurement have identified a potential supplier for this service and costs will be identified for consideration.

### Consultations

Responses were provided to raise awareness of regional needs to: - the Scottish Government Energy and Just transition Consultation; The case for change transport consultation from Highland Council; the formal consultation from Scottish Government on the UHI three college merger; A survey regarding economic impacts from Hydrogen being introduced to power crew transfer vessels based at Wick.

### Online activity

Our social media footprint continues to grow across platforms, and our website has attracted activity from visitors downloading our masterplan, and the supply chain presentation delivered at the Dounreay stakeholder event.

## **Focus North support for regional projects**

We are continuing to engage with West of Orkney Offshore windfarm through its socio-economic working group and directly with Pentland Floating Offshore Wind Farm. West of Orkney has already led a £900,000 investment to support a STE(A)M initiative at University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) to promote careers in science, technology, engineering, and maths (STE(A)M). The expansion of this provision includes funding for two full-time STE(A)M coordinators located in Caithness & Sutherland and Orkney.

The STE(A)M 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.

Sutherland Spaceport has commenced construction with entrance way works and lay-by extensions being undertaken. The continued expectation is of a first launch occurring during 2024. Focus North efforts are concentrated on developing the space cluster approach. Encouragingly several small-scale inward investment opportunities are already being pursued.

## **Focus North organisational update**

To progress these priority actions a Business Development Manager has joined the Focus North support team. After an open recruitment process Focus North Business Development Manager has been recruited (Nicola Sinclair) and started on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May. Nicola has come from media background having undertaken business development on behalf of Channel 4 in a previous role. In subsequent years she has spent some time as Highland councillor for Wick and East Caithness. She joins Focus North from her most recent role working as a reporter for the Press and Journal.

Peter Faccenda

Focus North Programme Manager  
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