

Focus North Programme Update

9th Oct 2023

General

Following the relaunch of the partnership under the Focus North banner completed in February 2023, priority areas continue as: -

- Increasing the pool of skilled personnel.
- Infrastructure, transport, and accommodation to support growth in the workforce and improve the Inward Investment offering.
- Strengthening the Digital economy
- Inward investment and project development opportunities.

These are managed through a detailed action plan consisting top-level initiatives, each led by a named individual.

Focus North programme implementation – current priorities.

Peter Faccenda - Programme manager (PF); Nicola Sinclair – Business Development Manager (NS); Cathy Souter Admin and Comms Officer (CS)

Skills and talent attraction

- Action plan development with the support of Jacobs, led by Caithness Chamber of Commerce is completed, a review of the recommendations and agreed actions to be adopted into the plan will take place 10th October.
 - Prioritised actions will be included in the programme when finalised.
 - NS Exploring a shared apprenticeship model. Considering significant challenges in creating a commercially viable model, a mock-up scheme approach is being tested by the Chamber of commerce on 20 or so selected businesses to gauge appetite, issues and refine approach. Following desk research and meetings, it's clear this will be a difficult model to pursue, due to overhead costs and Scottish Government funding criteria. SDS to help shape the scheme it is taken forward. However, other models – such as a simple bursary scheme – may prove to be simpler and equally (or more) effective.
 - NS worked with NatureScot, UHI and local contractors on a bid to the council's newly launched Skills Challenge Fund (funded by UK Shared Prosperity Fund), submitted on 6 October. If successful, the bid will fund a one week 'introduction to peatland restoration', a two-day onsite practical course, and two optional modules in first aid and ATVs. There are 15 places available to local SMEs, and we have three business interested.

Transport for employment

Urban Foresight research – 350+ responses received. Modelling of demand has identified a proposed approach and initial stakeholder discussions held in Sutherland (4 Oct) and Caithness (5 Oct) have been encouraging. Further detailed work on organisational model, costings and key issues is now underway. Report still due for completion in November.

Digital economy

Focus North has identified a group of key stakeholders, including local service users, providers and industry experts. A workshop led by UHI which included a PESTLE and SWOT analysis to commence the development of an action plan was held at UHI 24th August. One potential is developing a niche area of expertise for the far north, as a catalyst for further growth in the sector. Feedback from the workshop suggests 'data analysis and storage' is a strong area for growth. There is interest from data centre developers, and we've been meeting with local IT sector businesses for further discussion/guidance. Action plan to be developed once priorities clarified.

Public Service Obligation Wick John O'Groats Airport (WJoG)

Partners are Coordinating efforts to ensure continuity in the PSO from WJoG. A business plan developed with support from stakeholders Northpoint Aviation, commissioned by the Highland Council was submitted 6th October. Representations (via Chamber of Commerce & Highland Council) to Transport Scotland and Ministers have been made to demonstrate the success of the PSO so far, and the vital nature and the need for this service to continue. The Chamber have made representations to ministers and MSPs and will follow up with one-to-one meetings in support. A Letter of support from Focus North Independent Chair was provided to the council, amongst other stakeholder letters of support.

Focus North support for regional projects.

- A further opportunity has arisen to progress a Low Carbon Innovation Institute (LOCII) to be based at the UHI Thurso campus. A call for funding to establish Accelerating the Green Economy Centres has been announced. An outline prospectus has been prepared for consideration and a bid preparations process is to be agreed amongst partners. A webinar is being held on 11th Oct where further details of the process will be given.
- PF continues to support Flow Country Green Finance Initiative (FCGFI), led by NatureScot, seeking to attract private investment into peatland restoration projects, to support the environmental benefits and the opportunities to provide long term employment in a range of careers, from scientists to machinery operators. The FCGFI seeks to establish an investable model to attract the significant private investment needed to support this. Funding of £100k through IRNS (Investment Readiness for Nature in Scotland) and a further £240k to FIRNS (successor scheme to IRNS) & National Lottery Heritage fund have both now been secured, meaning pilot schemes can now be progressed.
- Wick Harbour – NS working to support WHA in updating and further developing their business case to expand port capacity to maximise opportunities around Offshore wind. Follow-up meetings arranged with HIE and Council Leader.
- Sutherland Spaceport construction continues, and lay-by extensions are now completed. 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. Discussions continue on how best to manage and resource this initiative, to maximise local benefits of the space cluster.

- General inward investment - several key issues continue to arise when inquiries are being made. Frequent questions raised are availability of: - buildings – office, workshop industrial and other; land for development; power (including potentially private wire arrangements); data connectivity; skills and staff availability. With the increasing volume of developments in the region it now seems appropriate to progress an 'Infrastructure prospectus'. This would be a repository of information around regional infrastructure, relevant contacts and other information that would make inward investment conversations more focused.

Promotion and awareness raising

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

Recent

- A proposed just transition pilot area proposal has been submitted to the new Just Transition Minister Mairi McAllen. The opportunity to make contact to discuss the pilot further with various officials was offered by Mairi McAllan
- NS Q&A in the August issue of Dounreay staff magazine, published to raise awareness of Focus North and its programme priorities.

In development

- Further press articles on topics such as future employment trends in our region - particularly environmental science-based careers.
- Working on plans for a more coordinated promotion, not only of FN activities, but the region. This includes the development of a series of short videos highlighting interesting career options in Caithness. Dounreay has offered to help identify young people to interview 'vox pop' style and video support.

Online activity

Our social media footprint continues to grow across platforms.

Consultations

Responded to SSEN Consultation on Community Benefit Fund (Potential £10 Million community benefit fund). Closed 13th Aug.

Other

An executive board workshop was held in Inverness on Thursday 7th September. The purpose of this was to further strengthen working relationships, board engagement and ensure that there is consensus of how resources are prioritised. Engagement was extremely good, and several draft proposals were outlined. Conclusions and approaches will be shared when finalised.

Focus North Team
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