

DSG Socioeconomic group

Focus North Programme update.



15th Jan 2024

General

Priority areas continue as: -

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

We have completed two significant background studies: - One on talent attraction and skills needs produced by Jacobs and the second on Transport needs commissioned from specialist consultancy Urban Foresight. Both of these identify individual strands of activity to be progressed, as well as potential wider crossover with other activities and highlight the **challenges of how to progress these activities from within existing resources and highlights the need to be clear on which partners should lead each.**

Focus North programme implementation – current priorities.

Skills and talent attraction

Action plan development with the pro-bono support of Jacobs, led by Caithness Chamber of Commerce is completed, a review of the recommendations and agreed actions took place on the 10th of October. From this initial and priority actions underway:-

- NM/Trudy Morris exploring a skills development plan that largely targets business support, to avoid duplication with existing public sector skills development and education programmes. Initiatives being developed:-
 - **Privately subsidised apprenticeships** via bursaries scaled up using the Caithness Business Fund as a delivery mechanism.
 - **Supporting SMEs to reduce carbon emissions** and gain recognised accreditation, reducing costs and increasing marketability. Seeking to launch a Focus North branded scheme of Net Zero Nation - a social enterprise seeking to accelerate carbon reductions in supply chains. Aim to work with local delivery training partner (potentially Chamber).
 - **Skills Transition Academy** - proposals received to develop the X-Academy model in our region in a similar vein has been successfully developed at Islands Centre for Net Zero.
 - Other ideas include **summer bootcamp to support hospitality** industry and targeted funding and training.
- **Peatland restoration training** (“For Peat's Sake”) - Funding of c£30k funding now confirmed from Highland Council (via Skills Challenge Fund). 15 places available on one-week intro course, followed by 2 days onsite training at Forsinard. NM developed this bid with NatureScot, UHI and three named Caithness and Sutherland business partners. UHI discussing further course development as follow-up.
- **A talent attraction initiative** that incorporates both regional promotion, to increase visibility of careers in our area, and more tailored support to help working families to move here. Initial work to identify barriers, approaches to help overcome these and develop a recruitment toolkit are being undertaken with support from external resources. To embed this approach, it has also been agreed to recruit a specialised recruitment resource to develop and strengthen Recruit North Highlands.

Next steps: -

- A key recommendation from the Jacobs report was they need to better **understand the needs of the major project developers** and integrate these into the Focus North programme. A meeting of a significant group of these developers is scheduled for the end of February.
- The initial priorities distilled from the Jacobs skills report are being progressed, but a cohesive **regional skills plan is being developed**. This will concentrate on **skills to support businesses** but will identify how this fits together with existing provision.

Transport for employment

The Urban Foresight demand study (350+ survey responses) substantially funded by the Caithness place-based demonstrator has now concluded. This demand was modelled, and transport solutions were proposed. From feedback further detailed work on organisational model, costings and a Dounreay specific case study were completed in December. The report will be circulated once an internal review at Dounreay has completed.

The model identified is: -

- To meet remote and rural areas' needs with a number of small multi occupancy electric vehicles some of which would be demand responsive.
- To integrate this provision with conventional buses on more populated routes.
- Provide more active travel around urban centres with, for example, electric bikes.

Any new vehicles would be net zero compliant and gradually existing equipment would be replaced. Some of these facilities already exist, some are already being developed by partners, and others would need to be established.

This initiative is working closely with the Sutherland Transport committee that is seeking to establish an umbrella organisation (working title Sutherland Transport) to co-ordinate various community led transport initiatives. Funding to support that initiative is being sought.

Next steps:-

- Identify lead organisations and agree partner resources for the next phase to lead implementation of a pilot transport solution. The aspiration is to purchase a small EV multi-occupancy vehicle to operate on agreed routes as a first step.
- Identify how new solutions can be integrated with existing transport provision.

Space Industry Opportunities

Spaceport Sutherland construction continues with continued expectation of a first launch during 2024. Focus North efforts are aimed at maximising local benefits by developing space industry or related opportunities locally. Encouragingly, several small-scale inward investment opportunities are already being pursued.

Next steps:-

- HIE to lead on clarifying roles and responsibilities in benefit realisation.
- Revise TORs Space cluster groups and agree a refreshed approach.

Low Carbon/Energy transition centre

Opportunity:- to build on expertise within the region, expanding research and innovation capacity to support developments in:- renewable energy- particularly floating offshore wind; tidal stream; battery storage; space industry (and related data applications), and environmental science with particular specialism in peatland restoration.

A centre such as EMEC in Orkney but with different specialisms could be developed to expand capacity and better meet local development needs, and act as a beacon project for the area. Alternative options might meet needs too but will require exploration and development and agreement amongst potential partners and investors.

Issues: - Recent propositions for funding calls for the 'Inverness City Region Deal' and 'Accelerating the Green Economy Centres' have highlighted capacity issues within academic partners – both to develop and pursue bids and the challenges in increasing capacity to deliver research and development for academia and local businesses. With generally diminishing public sector budgets funding calls will only become more competitive, so getting private sector buy in to shape this is vital.

Next steps:-

- Identifying needs from Industry forum group
- Continue to explore options to identify optimal approach and then develop a business case - a visit to MSPARC Science Park on Anglesey is planned in February that will help inform potential solution. This development has been created in a very similar remote location adjacent to a decommissioning nuclear site so there are many parallels.

Peatlands restoration

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. With funding of £100k through IRNS (Investment Readiness for Nature in Scotland) and £240k from FIRNS (successor scheme to IRNS) & National Lottery Heritage fund, a peatland restoration officer has been recruited and the pilot schemes are now being progressed. 4C report on Economic Impact to be published imminently.

Digital economy

Focus North identified a group of key stakeholders, including local service users, providers, and industry experts. A workshop at UHI 24th August has identified a potential to develop a strategy for data/AI as a key niche sector for the region, and some skills activities that could be developed as a result.

Discussions have been held with a with global data centre provider seeking to potentially develop an edge data centre in Caithness and North Sutherland.

Next steps: - Further developments will be shaped by the results of these deliberations.

Focus North support for regional projects.

- Wick Harbour – partners continue to support WHA in efforts to repair storm damage as a first step and then to expand port capacity to maximise opportunities around Offshore wind.
- 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.

- Partners have been co-ordinating 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. A decision is expected imminently.

Promotion and awareness raising

Using capacity available through 3x1 we continue to raise the profile of the region and Focus North. Our social media footprint continues to grow across platforms.

In development

- Further press article on future employment trends in our region - particularly environmental science-based careers to be issued imminently.
- Working on plans for a more coordinated promotion, not only of Focus North activities, but the region. This includes recruiting 'ambassadors' to provide short vox pop style videos on why they choose to live and work here. A regional promotional film, highlighting the regional story, showcasing the opportunities ahead and a bit of 'myth busting' around lack of local opportunities.
- Website development – NM producing new website.
- The Focus North conference will be held on the 19th March 2024 at the Norseman Hotel in Wick. Invitations will be issued imminently.

Focus North Team
15th January 2023

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