

Focus North Programme Update

DSG Socioeconomic subgroup – 4th July 2025

General

The Programme areas of focus continue to be: - Supporting the Wick Airport/PSO working group in developing a business plan; Seeking a replacement project lead for the innovation project; Identifying governance mechanisms to develop a programmatic approach to co-developing the PoD; Housing and accommodation investigation; the Focus North conference on the 2nd October; and the summer programme for engagement with young people which was launched at assemblies with Thurso and Wick S4 Students on 19th and 26th June.

Space Industry Update

A meeting of the Spaceport Stakeholder group was held on 16th June in Tongue. The operator provided updates that confirmed intention to continue previously announced plans and timescales. HIE continue to look at options and engage with relevant parties on these.

Resourcing and next steps

In the short-term Focus North will continue a holding brief until the future direction is clear or specific opportunities arise that need support.

Skills and Talent attraction

Industry Forum

The Industry Forum continues to work towards a skills/talent/people needs 'map' comprising a detailed analysis quantifying likely jobs/skills required across developments and indicative dates. Magnus Davidson at Dounreay is leading through a series of 1:1 discussions. The meeting on 17 June was positive with several attendees providing or undertaking to provide information.

Resourcing of next steps

Dounreay as lead partner on this strand of activity are providing internal resource to support.

Skills development

Several skills initiatives for the region continue to progress.

- **Net Zero Nation** – The first cohort of will conclude and 'graduate' in July.
Next cohort – NRS Dounreay leading with supply chain companies – will continue to liaise.
- **Privately subsidised apprenticeships** –NRS Dounreay have provided additional funds (£250k including £50k for a graduate support scheme) for 2025/26 and other funding is being sought.
- **Talent attraction** – the Venture North merger into the Caithness chamber of commerce is complete, and a deputy chief executive of the chamber has been appointed with a specific remit around tourism. The Venture North (Tourism) and Live North (Talent attraction) websites are being revised and expected to be live imminently.
- **Powering Futures.** This is a 30-week Higher equivalent programme for 5/6th Year students. Its purpose is to raise awareness of renewable energy employment opportunities whilst upskilling students in employability skills and improving confidence. **Now to be delivered in Wick HSs –**

Thurso still in discussion; Resource constraints making this challenging for Farr HS. [Powering Futures](#)

- **Peatland restoration training** ('For Peat's Sake') – BBC content aired 3rd July [Reporting Scotland - News at Seven: 03/07/2025 - BBC iPlayer](#) telling the story of Liam Mackay a crofter who undertook the training and has subsequently found work in the industry, looking at the environmental and economic benefits of this.

Resourcing and next steps

Further developments are being reappraised now that Admin and comms officer is in post.

Peatlands restoration

PF continues to provide general management support for Flow Country Partnership SCIO (FCP). The FIRNS funding concluded in March, though a small balance of National Lottery Heritage funding continues. This supported the recruitment of a **peatland restoration officer & a project officer, resulting** in two restoration projects - Armadale farm (Phase 1) & Achentoul Estates which are now complete. A pilot common grazings for a third restoration has now been identified and is in development. **A second peatland officer working four days a week for FCRL has been recruited through RSPB** with costs supported by a legacy donation. Phase 2 of the Armadale restoration is planned to commence in August.

Resourcing and next steps

Highland Council have recruited for 2 posts relating to the UNESCO World Heritage site management (Flow Country Partnership Manager – commences 7 July and World Heritage site officer - commences 8 Aug) that will provide much needed additional capacity to the partnership. Immediate follow-on financing through further grant agreements has been partly secured to cover costs of existing team to allow continued progression. Discussions continue with potential carbon purchasers and several large-scale investors.

Support for regional projects

Point of Delivery and Innovation centre opportunities

Highland Council is developing a Point of Delivery (PoD) in Thurso. This will be an educationally underpinned facility with school provision incorporated. However, it allows opportunity to co-develop other facilities and service provision. Concurrently: - NRS Dounreay is re-examining its facilities for off-site staff accommodation; UHI is reviewing its estate needs; HIE is reviewing business premises needs; and there is an increasing recognition of the need for rapid action on housing and accommodation. The timing of these activities sits well with the plans to develop an innovation centre offering.

The first steps to develop an outline business plan for an Innovation centre have commenced with the recruitment of a replacement for the project lead post (0.5) FTE. Support from the University of Chester continues until end of July.

Resourcing and next steps

The project lead has accepted another role within UHI and so this role will need to be recruited. In the interim Stuart Gibb is supporting the development of the group and process to progress this.

With the PoD development process now underway we need to revisit how these complex and intertwined developments will be resourced locally. A meeting to share current thinking and look at development

options on the 28th May has identified some key next steps for consideration. Follow up meetings have identified that a Focus North working group should be established.

Wick John O' Groats Airport

The working group developing a longer-term business plan incorporating a PSO is now meeting fortnightly. An initial technical study, commissioned by Highland Council from North Point aviation, on market conditions, types of aircraft available, and examining potential routes, landing slots and other variables has reported initial findings to the working group. It is vital to provide a robust case for continuation of the PSO, which in turn crucially underpins the case for the Airport.

Resourcing and next steps

Highland Council have appointed a replacement for the outgoing PSO Manager, and an additional resource has been seconded from HITRANS to support the business plan development. Discussions on future arrangements and next steps between NRS Dounreay and Highland Council.

Housing and accommodation

In discussions around talent attraction, accommodation and housing issues are being identified by several partners as a growing barrier to attracting new talent to the area. This is agreed as an immediate and urgent issue.

Resourcing and next steps

A Senior HIE Development Manager is reviewing existing delivery mechanisms to propose actions on how Focus North partners can contribute to this issue in the locality. Two projects are being considered as pilot projects to develop potential delivery models.

Just Transition Commission 2025

Following the Just Transition Commission¹ visit to Caithness on the 7th and 8th of May 2025, the Commission has requested case studies on the Focus North approach and the Flow Country peatland restoration activity. These were submitted Friday 27th June and are being considered for inclusion in the Just Transition conference on the 29th October in Edinburgh. If included this would provide the region with an additional high-profile opportunity to showcase opportunities and highlight challenges.

Resourcing and next steps

Follow up actions resulting from this visit have been identified and a follow-on report was provided to the commission. The case studies are largely based on information provided in those documents. If included, we need to decide how to present our regional case studies to the conference.

Conference and summer programme

The Focus North conference will now take place on **2 October**, as the culmination/celebration of the two DYW young people's events and the summer engagement programme. Nicky Marr is to host. The conference will include a live interactive survey, plenary sessions and presentations from developers. To maximise time for audience participation, discussion, brainstorming and networking, Focus North's activities will be summarised via the creation of a high-quality video highlights reel. This can also be shared as a piece of marketing collateral and provided to partners for promotion.

The DYW school assemblies in Wick and Thurso in June went well and bookings are now being taken for the summer programme and the conference. The DYW survey to senior phase in Wick, Thurso and Farr

¹ [Just Transition Commission](#)

High Schools has now been published. The Wick assembly coincided with a small scale careers fair. Dounreay and HIE have confirmed their intention to run a youth perceptions survey to complement this, asking young people for their views of living and working in north Highland. They are currently looking at an appropriate procurement approach.

The summer programme 'Live Highland, Live Happy' is taking shape:

- Highland Council have given high level support to run the first Minecraft Education programme in Scotland ' Reinventing our Region', adapted from Minecraft's Reinventing Cities programme. This will run over several weeks supported by teachers and invite young people to redesign Caithness and Sutherland, sparking insightful discussions and culminating in a prize giving. HC are looking at linking it to existing awards schemes like Duke of Edinburgh. We are seeking sponsorship for a prize and have identified a donor – Amentum Holdings. (Previously known as Jacobs)
- A coach/mentor has been engaged to deliver coaching sessions with young people on: anxiety/confidence, communication/presentation skills
- Workshops on CV development, interview skills, and a Lego challenge
- We have been unable to include work experience opportunities in the programme. This will be developed, and it is hoped to launch a programme of experience at or around the October conference
- The 'Powering Futures' team are running workshops to engage parents on renewable energy job opportunities.
- We continue to seek opportunities to engage with parents and teachers to provide updates and information. HC led meeting on 3rd June and the assemblies at Thurso and Wick high schools provided an initial opportunity to engage with teaching leadership and staff.

Resourcing and next steps

Conference planning will now commence, with the formation of a planning group. The first meeting is planned as the last 30 mins of the Delivery group 8th July.

Focus North Resources

- An Admin and Comms officer commenced in post on the 12th June.
- Focus North Independent Chair – the Board has agreed to continue this role, and Simon has agreed to continue in the interim. Internal budget approval has been given, the recruitment process will be commenced shortly.

Peter Faccenda
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