

Focus North Programme Update

DSG Socioeconomic Subgroup – 8th October 2025

Summary

The areas of focus continue to be: - Supporting the Wick Airport/PSO working group in developing a business plan; Developing the Innovation centre project; Working with partners develop a programmatic approach to co-developing the Thurso Point of Delivery; Housing and accommodation investigation; and following up from the summer programme for engagement with young people now that Schools have returned. The Focus North Conference 2025 was held on the 2nd of October and more than 120 people attended.

Space Industry Update

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 16th September was positive and information is now being collated.

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 now complete and case studies with Caithness Engineering Services published on Social Media and JGC case study to follow.
Next cohort – led by NRS Dounreay has commenced – will continue to liaise.
- **Privately subsidised apprenticeships** – Other funding continues to be sought.
- **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 High School – Thurso still in discussion; Resource constraints making this challenging for Farr High.**
[Powering Futures](#)

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), although day-day support is diminishing as the Flow Country Partnership Manager settles into their role. Challenges continue to be short term cash flow, developing a project pipeline and attracting carbon purchasers and investors. Identifying. Phase 2 of the Armadale restoration commenced in August and should conclude in October. A pilot common grazings for a third restoration was submitted as a project for Peatland Action grant support in September - the result of this application will be known later in the year.

Resourcing and next steps

Immediate follow-on financing through further grant agreements has been partly secured to cover costs of existing team to allow continued progression. Short term cashflow is being managed using short term commercial finance. 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. 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.

Resourcing and next steps

A new project manager (0.5) FTE has been appointed and is commencing the process to develop an outline business plan for the Innovation centre.

With the Thurso PoD development process now underway a Thurso Transformation Delivery Group has been formed 21st August and met again 23rd September. This agreed the outline of terms of reference and a comms and reporting structure is being developed. Group is very conscious that communications is a vital and a draft communication strategy was prepared by the Focus North team and presented at the meeting in September.

Wick John O' Groats Airport

The working group developing a longer-term business plan has now largely finalised the business plan which is to be submitted to Transport Scotland imminently. A summary business plan approach has been agreed with Transport Scotland, and this has been drafted and partner input sought. Concerns have been raised by several stakeholders regarding the reduction in working hours at the airport. Key stakeholders are making representations through channels as there is a concern that this may impact future airport operations.

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 and then implementation.

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. A local event to bring together key stakeholders to understand local challenges and opportunities is being scheduled.

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. We have now had confirmation all of the case studies from our region will be included in the Just Transition exhibition and conference on the 29th October in Edinburgh. This provides the region with an additional high-profile opportunity to showcase opportunities and highlight challenges. A small team will attend to present and support of all of the case studies.

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. Attendance at the conference will allow us to further promote these messages.

Conference and summer programme

As a follow up to the DYW school assemblies in Wick and Thurso in June and to close out the summer programme an assembly and careers fair was held at Thurso high school on 25th September. This was a lively event with young people engaging extremely actively with the employers present. Focus north presented details on future opportunities and in particular those surrounding the offshore wind industry.

The Focus North conference took place on **2 October**, including the culmination/celebration of the two DYW young people's events and the summer engagement programme. [Focus North Conference 2025](#). More than 120 delegates attended. Nicky Marr hosted, and the highlight has to be the young person's panels: - A total of 6 young people including 3 senior phase school students, an Apprentice, a Graduate Apprentice and a Graduate who spoke of their hopes and aspirations and opinions on life in Caithness and North Sutherland and took questions from the audience. Prior to the event more than 220 school students and 40 college students had been surveyed regarding the same issues. A live interactive survey helped delegates understand the results of these and provided a focus and call to action for delegates. A regional opportunities video was premiered and highlights from this will be used in promotion, social media and the Focus Norths website. This can also be shared as marketing collateral and provided to

¹ [Just Transition Commission](#)

partners for promotion. Just ask one of the team. The Minecraft competition was explained to delegates and further information on this will follow when the teams working on their plans have completed them.

NRS 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.

From the summer programme 'Live Highland, Live Happy' we've identified some key learnings and are planning some term time events to increase engagement.

- Now that Schools have returned the Minecraft Education programme 'Reinventing our Region', adapted from Minecraft's Reinventing Cities programme is now running in two of the Schools. 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. Amentum Holdings (Previously known as Jacobs) have provided a PS5 console as a prize for the winning submission. A further celebration will be held once the competition has concluded.
- **Difficulties in the existing work experience process have been recognised, and a new system is being implemented. Updates will be given as the new system is rolled out.**
- **It proved challenging to get significant numbers of attendees to the workshop events so we're pivoting to run some of these activities during school terms as there is evidence of need.**
- We continue to seek opportunities to engage with parents and teachers to provide updates and information.

Resourcing and next steps

Activities and engagement will be delivered by the team as part of our ongoing activity.

Communications

Focus North Independent Chair – The recruitment process is underway and a selection panel from the Focus North Board identified. Initial advertising didn't attract suitable applicants, and further work is being done to explore options.

Peter Faccenda
Focus North Programme Manager