

Focus North Programme Update

Dounreay Stakeholder Group – 13th January 2026

Summary

The programme priority areas for 2026: -

- Working with partners on a programmatic approach to co-developing the Thurso Point of Delivery (PoD) to maximise local benefit, reduce overlap and maximise integration between projects.
- Developing the business plan for the innovation centre and seeking to integrate it with the Thurso developments.
- Housing and accommodation - developing pilots and full-scale implementation that fits with the PoD in Thurso, matches ambitions in Wick and support rural developments where appropriate.
- Supporting talent attraction
- Engagement with young people
- Support for business plan and implementation for the long term PSO.

Wick John O' Groats Airport

Short term PSO has now been agreed with a new provider (Air Charter Scotland). The follow on PSO business plan was submitted to Transport Scotland in October with ministerial approval awaited.

Resourcing and next steps

Highland Council quickly mobilised a successful tender process and have appointed an operator. This short-term contract covers the period until the next PSO process is completed assuming ministerial approval.

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. First results from 1:1 discussions with developers will be shared at the meeting.

Resourcing of next steps

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

Point of Delivery and Innovation centre opportunities

Highland Council Point of Delivery (PoD) in Thurso. This educationally underpinned facility with school provision offers opportunity to co-develop other facilities and service provision. Concurrently: - NRS Dounreay is examining its facilities for off-site staff; UHI is reviewing its estate needs; The innovation centre business plan is being developed; HIE is reviewing business premises needs; and there is need for rapid action on housing and accommodation.

Resourcing and next steps

To progress these opportunities the Thurso Transformation Delivery Group (TTDG) has been formed and has been meeting regularly. This group is meeting regularly, and a comms group is now operating, Chaired by Hub North Scotland. First preliminary public consultations at the North Coast Visitor Centre in Thurso took place on 9th and 10th December with more than 150 attendees.

Neil James is acting as project manager and is now co-ordinating efforts to develop an outline business plan for the [working title:] North Highland Innovation Centre. An initial outline scoping workshop was held on the 11th of December where several actions specifically around 'customer engagement' were identified.

Skills and Talent attraction

Meeting the current and future workforce needs for the region continues to be a key priority.

Retention - Raising awareness amongst locals and particularly young people of the significant opportunities both immediate and in the future: -

- **School engagement**
 - From the summer programme 'Live Highland, Live Happy' we've identified some key learnings and are planning some term time events to increase engagement. DYW NH continue to lead this, with Dee Bleakley confidence building workshops being a key element.
 - **The Minecraft Education programme ' Reinventing our Region'**, adapted from Minecraft's Reinventing Cities programme is now running in two Schools. Following the setback the resilience and enthusiasm shown by the pupils has been incredible and they anticipate completion by 13th Feb. A celebration event will still take place to follow and in recognition of their perseverance, we've agreed that each school will receive a PS5 console, although the pupils do not know this yet.
 - **Powering Futures** – This is a 30-week Higher equivalent programme for 5/6th Year students to raise awareness of renewable energy employment opportunities whilst upskilling students in employability skills and improving confidence. **Now being delivered in Wick High School – Thurso still in discussion; Resource constraints making this challenging for Farr High.** [Powering Futures](#)
 - **Parents and Teachers** - We continue to seek opportunities to engage with to provide updates and information.
- **Work experience** - This has been repeatedly identified is a vital way of highlighting opportunities to local young people and Highland Council are implementing a new system to expand these opportunities.
- **Youth perceptions survey** - NRS Dounreay and HIE are currently looking at an appropriate procurement approach to run an engagement with young people seeking their views of living and working in north Highland.

Attraction – outreach activities to raise the profile of regional opportunities and support working age migration to the area.

- **Live North** – the talent attraction initiative run by the North Highland Chamber of commerce has formally launched with ongoing support for the Talent Attraction manager post. [Live North - Helping you move and find Jobs in Highlands](#)

Immediate Skills development initiatives – aligning local capacity and capability to meet workforce demands.

- **Privately subsidised apprenticeships** – Other funding continues to be sought.
- **Net Zero Nation** – The first cohort now complete and case studies with Caithness Engineering Services and JGC published on social media.
Next cohort – led by NRS Dounreay has commenced – will continue to liaise.

Resourcing and next steps

Further developments will align with Talent attraction needs as identified.

Housing and accommodation

Talent attraction, accommodation and housing issues are identified as a growing barrier to attracting new talent to the area. A region wide housing needs demand survey is underway being undertaken by Arneil-Johnson on behalf of Highland Council with report anticipated later in the spring.

Resourcing and next steps

A Senior HIE Development Manager is co-ordinating an action plan to progress how Focus North partners can contribute to this issue in the locality. A workshop with key local stakeholders to understand challenges and identify solutions was held on 24th November. As a result, 3 immediate priorities are being pursued: Exploring off-site construction solutions; Identifying planning-related barriers that are preventing housing developments from progressing; Mapping underutilised and disused buildings across Caithness and Sutherland to assess opportunities for renovation and repurposing. Concurrently opportunities to pilot approaches to develop potential delivery models are being sought. The next meeting is scheduled for 23rd February.

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. Phase 2 of the Armadale restoration concluded 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 financial year. Two events were held in November bringing together stakeholders interested in tourism and visitor attraction and how it might interact with the UNESCO world heritage site. Both were well attended, and a tourism strategy is being developed incorporating feedback.

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.

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.

Just Transition Commission 2025

Following the Just Transition Commission¹ visit to Caithness on the 7th and 8th of May 2025, and the Just Transition summit on the 29th October in Edinburgh a follow up visit is now anticipated from the commission. This is potentially to be held on the 19th February with further details awaited.

Resourcing and next steps

Following on from the Summit – the First Minister announced that the commission will be renewed in the next parliament with a particular remit to scrutinise practical delivery. The commission has been approached to highlight the advantage of engaging with Caithness and Sutherland as a pilot area to measure impact of pilot activities. A response is awaited.

Communications

The Focus North website is being refreshed and will feature a dedicated page for TTDG updates, as well as links to relevant updates from partner organisations involved in the TTDG.

Team

Focus North Independent Chair – initial recruitment exercise did not produce a suitable candidate so further options are being considered.

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¹ [Just Transition Commission](#)