

# Focus North Programme Update

DSG Socioeconomic subgroup meeting 22nd April 2026

## **Summary**

The programme priority areas continue.

- Developing a programmatic approach to Thurso Point of Delivery.
- Developing the business plan for the North Highland Innovation centre.
- Housing and accommodation - developing pilots and full-scale implementation.
- Supporting talent attraction.
- Engagement with young people.
- Support for business plan and implementation for the long term PSO.
- Support for other area priority plans as identified and agreed.
- Support for FCP to achieve first carbon sales/investment.
- All Energy event preparation and promotion.

## **Wick John O' Groats Airport**

Short term PSO has now been agreed with a new provider (Air Charter Scotland) and an extension to allow this to continue until August has been approved. The follow on PSO business plan previously submitted is under active discussion with ministerial approval awaited. The tender process for this is underway with compliant bids received and evaluation underway.

## ***Resourcing and next steps***

The short-term contract now covers the period until the next PSO process is completed (assuming ministerial approval). There is an opportunity to maximise passenger uptake until August to demonstrate growth and potential future markets.

## **Industry Forum**

The Industry Forum 'baseline' indicates an additional circa 800 full time permanent jobs being created in the area by 2035. Next step is to drill into the detail of types of roles to develop pipeline opportunities for young people and training capacity.

## ***Resourcing of next steps***

Dounreay as lead partner on this strand of activity are providing resource to support. UHI are sharing information on how this has been successfully undertaken in Stornoway.

## **Point of Delivery and Innovation centre opportunities**

Highland Council Point of Delivery (PoD) in Thurso – This project continues to develop at pace with key engineering contractors appointed. Concurrently: - NRS Dounreay is examining its facilities for off-site staff; UHI is reviewing its estate needs and seeking to develop a lifelong learning campus; 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. NHS Scotland may also have a need to develop services in conjunction with the PoD - these have not yet been identified or factored in.

## ***Resourcing and next steps***

To progress these opportunities the Thurso Transformation Delivery Group has been formed and has been meeting regularly and a comms group is now operating, chaired by Hub North Scotland. The governance structure has been outlined through a draft memorandum understanding for the key partners involved. An initial workshop to go through how this will operate his plan for the 24th of April.

[working title:] North Highland Innovation Centre. Neil James is acting as project manager and is now co-ordinating efforts to develop an outline business plan.

## **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**

- **Dee Bleakley** returned to Thurso and Wick High Schools last month and attended Farr High for the first time.
  - Thurso covered self-awareness and habit forming with S2 students (approx. 115)
  - Wick covered successful individuals with S1 students (approx. 108)
  - Farr covered confidence/presentation skills with S3 students (approx. 15) and study skills with S4-6 students (approx. 27).
- **The Minecraft Education programme ' Reinventing our Region'**, adapted from Minecraft's *Reinventing Cities* initiative, has successfully concluded at Wick and Thurso High Schools, giving S1 pupils an inspiring opportunity to reimagine the future of their communities through creativity, collaboration and digital design. Delivered by Focus North with support from Highland Council's Youth Work and Adult Learning Team, the programme challenged pupils to design sustainable, community-focused versions of Caithness using Minecraft Education, while building confidence, teamwork and problem-solving skills. Despite a major IT setback that caused the loss of their work near the end of the project, both school teams demonstrated outstanding resilience and determination by rebuilding their designs from scratch. Their achievements were celebrated at a special event on 24 March at Wick High School, where pupils presented their final projects and received individual awards including the Eco-Schools Scotland Green Leadership Award, the Youth Scotland Dynamic Youth Award and the YouthLink Scotland Participative Democracy Certificate, while each school was also presented with a PlayStation 5 console, generously supported by local business Amentum, to help encourage future learning and digital creativity.
- **Powering Futures** – NRS Downreay are now a regional partner, supporting the delivery of this 30-week Higher-equivalent programme for S5/6 pupils. A highlight of the year was the Powering Futures Live event held at Ross County Football Club on 16<sup>th</sup> March, which provided an inspiring platform for students from across the Highlands and Moray to present their final assessments to an expert panel. The standard of presentations was outstanding, with pupils showcasing imaginative, well-researched solutions to real-world sustainability challenges. It was particularly impressive to see young people working confidently in teams, communicating their ideas with clarity and professionalism, and clearly stepping beyond their comfort zones. The energy and ambition on display at Ross County underlined the impact of the programme in building future-ready skills and confidence, and highlighted the strength of emerging talent across the region. **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 from partners. [Live North – Helping you move and find Jobs in Highlands](#).

### ***Resourcing and next steps***

Further developments will align with Talent attraction needs as identified.

### **Communications**

**All-Energy Conference:** Partners are collaborating to have significant presence at this year's All-Energy Event in Glasgow on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of May. A Focus North themed stand has been procured, and a number of partner and business organisations have indicated they will attend using that as a base. [All-Energy Exhibition & Conference | Renewable Energy Event](#) A Communications plan is in train. Goal is to raise the area profile, increase inward investor interest in local projects and facilities and promote the region as a great place to work, live, study, and visit.

**TTDG:** The Focus North website continues to be a key hub for TTDG information. The dedicated TTDG page is currently being refreshed, with work underway to rethink the layout and structure to better support regular updates and partner content. A communications sub-group has been formed and is meeting regularly to coordinate activity. The group is developing a series of short videos to highlight upcoming work within Thurso, with an initial focus on the Community POD.

### **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 year. A Senior HIE Development Manager is co-ordinating an action plan built from extensive engagement with the industry, developers and seeking to identify demand. Investigation has shown that despite demand there is still a gap between development on demand.

### ***Resourcing and next steps***

A Senior HIE Development Manager is co-ordinating an action plan built from extensive engagement with the industry, developers and seeking to identify demand. A key short-term challenge is to mobilise development of permanent housing solutions to meet SSEN's (via their tier one contractor Murphy's) short term workforce needs commencing in early 2027. Several potential projects have been identified and mobilisation to get these built is proving to be a challenge particularly as time is very much of the essence.

## **Peatlands restoration**

PF continues to provide general management support for Flow Country Partnership SCIO (FCP), although diminishing as the Flow Country Partnership Manager is now in post. In particular commercial development needs additional support. The two completed projects are working through validation 4 units created. A pilot third restoration including a common grazings continues to be developed with restoration targeted for winter '26. Work to build a tourism and visitor strategy continues.

### ***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. Two significant carbon purchase opportunities are being discussed.

## **Just Transition Commission 2025-6**

Following the Just Transition Commission<sup>1</sup> visit to Caithness on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2025, and the Just Transition summit on the 29<sup>th</sup> October in Edinburgh the Commission chose to launch its national report in Thurso on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February at a well-attended and well covered event.

### ***Resourcing and next steps***

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. We'll continue to liaise and explore options as the new commissions' remit becomes clear.

## **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.

## **Team**

Focus North Independent Chair – Initial process didn't attract suitable applicants; exploration of options is still underway.

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<sup>1</sup> [Just Transition Commission](#)