

Focus North Programme Update

DSG Socioeconomic Committee 22nd July 2026

Summary

The Focus North Programme update provides an overview of ongoing and planned activities aimed at regional development in North Highland, covering infrastructure, skills, housing, and environmental initiatives as of July 2026.

Programme Priorities Overview

The programme continues to focus on several key areas including :- developing a compelling case and shared development approach for the Thurso Lifelong learning and innovation campus; creating a business plan for the North Highland Innovation Centre; Advancing newbuild housing and accommodation projects and exploring retrofit opportunities; supporting talent attraction and youth engagement; and backing long-term Public Service Obligation (PSO) plans; and planning this year's conference. Additionally, efforts are underway to assist the Flow Country Partnership (FCP) in achieving its first carbon sales.

Lifelong Learning and Innovation Campus

This continues to be one of the most significant opportunities for the region in the short to medium term. The Highland Council's Point of Delivery (PoD) project in Thurso is progressing with public consultations commencing imminently. A prospectus for combined lifelong learning campus funding is now finalised (attached to papers for information). The North Highland Innovation Centre business plan development continues with a pivot to engage more directly with service users.

Housing and Accommodation

Housing and accommodation are recognized barriers to talent attraction. A region-wide housing needs survey by Arneil-Johnson for Highland Council is underway, with a report expected later in the year. A senior HIE Development Manager has established an action plan based on extensive industry and developer engagement. Short-term challenges include mobilizing permanent housing solutions to meet SSEN's temporary workforce starting early 2027. Several opportunities have been brought to an advanced stage in collaboration with Highland Council and SSEN's tier one contractor Murphy's. A project for circa 20 homes (60+ bedrooms) is in active consideration with a positive 'go' decision anticipated imminently.

Skills and Talent Attraction

Meeting workforce needs remains a priority with focus on retention and attraction. School engagement workshops by Dee Bleakley at Thurso, Wick, and Farr High Schools covering self-

awareness, success stories, confidence, presentation will be celebrated at the conference. Similarly, the Minecraft Education program “Reinventing our Region” which concluded successfully earlier in the year is being repeated this coming academic year and a presentation will be included in the conference. The Powering Futures program, supported regionally by NRS Dounreay, delivered a 30-week Higher-equivalent course for S5/6 pupils, culminating in a live event showcasing sustainability solutions.

A Highland Council/DWY group is working to bed in the new system for Work experience, overcome barriers, encourage employer engagement and increase pupil opportunities. So far only 12 pupils have undertaken work experience this year in the 3 high schools across the north and the plan is to increase this significantly. A segment is planned at the conference to highlight business benefits, progress and opportunities for engagement.

A youth perceptions survey had been planned to explore views on living and working in North Highland. However, existing insight from the Focus North annual survey, Planet People and other sources may provide sufficient evidence, and this will be reviewed before deciding whether further survey work is needed.

An initiative has launched under the Live North banner to target attracting construction skills to the area. Learning from this will help identify additional steps that may be needed to increase the inward migration of these workers.

Wick John O’ Groats Airport

The short-term PSO contract for Wick John O’ Groats Airport continues until August 2026. Ministerial approval via Transport Scotland is still pending. The tender process has received compliant bids and would be ready to mobilise on a positive decision. The HIE area team is leading a shared services workshop in September to explore potential helicopter support to be based at Wick.

Industry Forum

The Industry Forum baseline forecasts the creation of approximately 800 full-time permanent jobs by 2035. The next phase involves detailing specific roles to develop youth employment pipelines and training capacities. Dounreay leads this strand with support from the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), which shares insights from Stornoway’s experience.

Communications

Communications activity is being delivered in line with the 2026 communications plan, with current content focused on promoting the North Highlands' strengths, investment opportunities, infrastructure developments, skills pathways and talent attraction initiatives. Activity will increasingly focus on promoting the Focus North Conference ahead of September, followed by the sharing of key highlights and outcomes. The Focus North website continues to act as an information hub for the Thurso Transformation Delivery Group (TTDG), and proposals are being developed for a dedicated podcast series to support community engagement and improve understanding of the Thurso Community Point of Delivery project.

Focus North Conference 2026

Planning of the Focus North Conference 2026 is well advanced, with this year's event taking place at the Norseman Hotel, Wick, on 9th September. Under the theme 'Changing Perceptions', the conference will explore emerging opportunities across the North Highlands, showcase the region's existing strengths and capabilities, and highlight the pathways being developed to support future skills and workforce needs. The programme will feature developer and infrastructure updates, youth engagement initiatives and examples of positive action already underway, including presentations on the Minecraft Education and Powering Futures programmes, alongside the premiere of a new film produced by Local Lens Media showcasing the region's skills, businesses and expertise. An hour of networking will be available prior to the main conference proceedings, providing opportunities for delegates to connect with project partners and stakeholders.

Peatlands Restoration

The Focus North programme manager continues to provide management support to the Flow Country Partnership (FCP), though this is diminishing as the Partnership Manager is now in post. Commercial development options are being explored. Two completed restoration projects are undergoing unit validation, and a third pilot restoration targeting winter 2026 is in development, including common grazings. A tourism and visitor strategy is also progressing. Financing through grant agreements partially secures team costs, with short-term commercial finance managing cash flow. Two significant carbon sale opportunities are under discussion.

Space Industry Update

Highland and Islands Enterprise (HIE) continues to explore options and engage relevant parties regarding the space industry. The Focus North team will maintain a holding brief until clearer a direction of travel emerges or specific opportunities arise.

Team

The search for a new independent chair for Focus North has not yet yielded suitable candidates. This will be covered by a temporary arrangement whilst the search continues, and the post is potentially re-advertised.

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