

Focus North programme update

DSG Socioeconomic subgroup

14th April 2025

General

Progress has been made in several key areas since the last meeting with confirmation of the PSO funding for the Wick John O'Groats Aberdeen route, the lead for the innovation starting, recruitment of a replacement admin and comms post for Focus North commencing and agreement to continue the role of Independent Chair. The Focus North conference for 2025 is now set for 2nd October.

Space Industry Update

HIE continue to look at options and engage with Orbex 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 18 March 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.

Innovation opportunities

The first steps to develop an outline business plan have commenced with the appointment of a project lead (0.5) FTE. Support from the University of Chester continues with a visit by researchers planned in April.

Resourcing of next steps

Project lead will now: -

- Create a partner steering group. **First introductory meeting 19th March.**
- Develop a Programme to bring this concept to an outline business plan.
- Explore other opportunities in nuclear and other innovation areas

Additional partner resources from HIE - Energy team and Innovation teams identified and Highland Council (key individual to be identified).

Skills development

Several skills initiatives for the region continue to progress.

- **Net Zero Nation** – First cohort of 14 organisations are generally progressing well, a small number of organisations are identifying resourcing issues.
Next cohort – NRS Dounreay leading with supply chain companies – will continue to liaise.
- **Privately subsidised apprenticeships** –NRS Dounreay have indicated that additional funds available in the 2025/26 budget and potential other funding sources being sought.
- **Talent attraction initiative** – 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 by the end of May.
- **Peatland restoration training** ('For Peat's Sake') – **BBC filming took place in March** to produce television and radio content to tell the story of a crofter who undertook the training and has subsequently found work in the industry, looking at the environmental and economic benefits of this.

Resourcing of next steps

Further developments are being reappraised following the appointment of Rebel Creative.

Peatlands restoration

PF continues to support Flow Country Partnership SCIO(FCP) development. Following FIRNS (concluded in March) the National Lottery Heritage fund, (which allowed the recruitment of a **peatland restoration officer & a project officer**. Two restoration schemes - Armadale farm (Phase 1) & Achentoul Estates are now complete. Total £600k cost, reduce 2,240 t+ of CO₂ and create c2,200 Carbon credits pa). These had bridging financing from Social Investment Scotland and Highland Opportunities Investments Limited. A pilot common grazings for a third restoration has now been identified and is in development. **A second peatland officer has been recruited through RSPB working four days a week on this project.**

Resourcing of next steps

Highland Council are now recruiting 2 posts relating to the UNESCO World Heritage site management (Flow Country Partnership Manager and World Heritage site officer) that will provide additional capacity to the partnership. Immediate follow-on financing through further grant applications has been partly secured to cover costs of existing team to allow continued progression. Discussions continue with carbon purchasers and several large-scale investors.

Support for regional projects

Wick John O' Groats Airport

Great news that the PSO funding has been agreed for the year 2025/26. A longer-term plan now needs to be developed and a working group has been established to develop this.

Resourcing of next steps

The current funding for the PSO officer has concluded and incumbent is moving to another role. Discussions on next steps are underway 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 of next steps

HIE Regional Development Manager reviewing existing delivery groups and mechanisms to propose actions on how Focus North partners can contribute to this issue.

Just Transition Commission visit – May 2025

The Just Transition Commission¹ are visiting Caithness on the 7th and 8th of May 2025. This will provide the region with the opportunity to showcase opportunities and highlight challenges. The Commission will visit UHI Thurso Campus, Dounreay and BOWL² during their time in the region, but have also provided the opportunity to meet the commissioners at PPP in Wick and provide feedback on the evening of the 7th – link to event below: -

[A just transition for Caithness? Tickets, Wed, May 7, 2025 at 6:30 PM | Eventbrite](#)

A review of JTC's own 'measures of success' is being used as a framework to identify challenges and opportunities for progress. We are seeking to promote ideas for support with some achievable quick wins as well as more ambitious long-term projects such as the low carbon innovation institute.

Update from Nicola More on comms and conference activities below: -

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 pencilled in 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 events in June (Wick) and September (Thurso) are progressing well in planning, and a survey has been circulated to S4 pupils in Wick, Thurso and Farr HS. A small team representing Focus North will attend both events to discuss the summer programme.

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 vehicle.

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

¹ [Just Transition Commission](#)

² Beatrice Offshore Windfarm Ltd

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.

- DYW have a coach/mentor who they are approaching to deliver coaching sessions with young people on: anxiety/confidence, communication/presentation skills
- DYW also looking at CV workshops, interview skills, 'speed networking' with local employers
- Dounreay seeking to mobilise work experience opportunities in their supply chain.
- Seeking opportunities to engaging parents and teachers to provide updates and information.

Focus North Resources

- Highland Council have commenced recruitment of replacement of Admin and Comms officer, with a good response to advert. Interviews planned for later in April.
- Focus North Independent Chair – the Board has agreed to continue replace this role and a recruitment process will be commenced shortly.

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