

FOCUS NORTH



DRIVING OPPORTUNITIES
THAT SHAPE OUR FUTURE



Focus North for a
sustainable future

Focus North will drive opportunities that shape our future. Delivering transformational initiatives to ensure the North of mainland Scotland generates growth, drives economic diversity, and leads the low carbon economy.

01

Focus North is an informal partnership of the Caithness Chamber of Commerce, Dounreay Nuclear Decommissioning Site*, Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, Skills Development Scotland, University of the Highlands and Islands and the Scottish Government.

These organisations have all committed to developing a fairer, resilient, more balanced economy in the north of mainland Scotland and to work collaboratively to achieve this. The aim is to sustainably expand the working population, grow and diversify the economy, increase the number of private sector businesses operating locally and attract investment into the area.

With its regional plan centred around sustainable economic growth for the benefit of local people and communities, Focus North seeks to attract jobs in key sectors such as space, offshore wind, tidal generation, hydrogen, future transport, nurturing the area's natural resources and environment, and sustainable tourism – as well as supporting employment in existing sectors.

* Dounreay, a division of Magnox Limited



→ About the Area



Focus North's geographical area includes Caithness and North Sutherland but is generally not defined by an exact line on a map. It is deliberately flexible to accommodate the differing needs of multiple emerging inward investment opportunities that would benefit the north of mainland Scotland.

Focus North's activities are conducted in close consultation with the Caithness and Sutherland Community Planning Partnerships so that opportunities are not omitted, but just as important, efforts are not duplicated.

Focus North concentrates on the northern most part of mainland Scotland, which incorporates the northern section of the North Coast 500 iconic tourist route, so the region's natural beauty and attractiveness to tourists is well known.

Perhaps less well known is that the region is leading:

The renewable energy revolution

- 12.5 times more electricity is already produced than used locally from renewable sources
- Production and storage capacity: -
 - Pentland Offshore Wind Farm is developing a 100 MW floating offshore wind demonstration project 7.5 kilometres from the Caithness coast
 - Recently agreed Scotwind sites surround the regions coasts supported by local harbours at Scrabster and Wick
 - The MeyGen Tidal stream generation array in the Pentland Firth that has been producing power since 2014 is being expanded from 1.5 to 28MW
 - The region is home to two of the UK's leading battery research and production companies – AMTE and Denchi Power
 - Development of battery storage schemes to help balance power production and demand
 - Hydrogen production of up to 2,000 tonnes per annum being proposed at Gordonbush from underutilised wind power.

- Hydrogen transport is being developed, with a hybrid aircraft being trialled between Wick and Kirkwall and hybrid trains are being trialled between Wick and Thurso in 2024

The Space Industry

- The Mhoine peninsula is home to Sutherland Spaceport – a vertical satellite launch site planning launches in 2024
- A developing space cluster seeking to attract up to 740 jobs supporting the space industry to the wider region

On the Natural Environment

- The UHI North Highland's Environmental Research Institute is carrying out world class research into the natural environment, including research into the peatlands of the Flow Country – Europe's biggest blanket bog
- The Flow Country, an internationally important carbon sink, in early 2023 was formally proposed for adoption as a UNESCO World Heritage site
- The Flow Country Green Finance Initiative is seeking to attract ethical private investment in support of peatland restoration and long-term management of this vital ecosystem

These activities will develop alongside the complex decommissioning programme at the Dounreay Nuclear site*. The site continues to employ a large, highly skilled workforce and technically innovative supply chain to develop solutions to world leading decommissioning challenges.



→ Masterplan



Extensive stakeholder engagement and background research was undertaken to identify key local priorities to encourage sustainable economic growth and bring these together into a plan of action. As a culmination of this process Focus North hosted an event in Thurso, inviting businesses and organisations to explore new economic opportunities in the north of mainland Scotland.

The event focused on the enormous opportunities developing in the region, with an agenda which included speakers highlighting imminent development plans from the offshore wind industry, the space sector, tourism and hospitality, natural capital and more. Participants were informed of findings from recent research which highlighted what key regional demographic groups see as important for economic growth.

To complement the extensive stakeholder engagement, three surveys were undertaken to inform content on the day, but also importantly to help shape the Focus North action programme.

- A third of event attendees responded to a pre-event survey
- A representative group of engineering students at the local college were polled
- 160 local school students in the upper 3 years of the local High Schools completed a survey run by The Developing the Young Workforce

Some themes were seen as important across all these groups, but younger respondents saw some issues as more important.

Across the board issues such as: – ensuring the right skills to meet needs are available by retaining, training and growing the working population; transportation links; digital connectivity; and housing availability were seen as vital.

Younger respondents valued work-life balance very highly but were worried about personal finances and individual confidence.

This research showed the majority of young people in the region were keen to stay in the area if they could find secure employment that provided a good work-life balance.



The partners have distilled all of the regional feedback and research and agreed a common purpose, values, vision, goals, and objectives and these are summarised in the document opposite.



Focus North Strategic Operational Policy: 2023 – 2026

Our Purpose	3-Year Vision	Strategic Objectives
<p>Driving the opportunities that shape <i>Our future</i></p>	<p>Our Partnership makes the difference by growing the economic prosperity of Our communities</p>	<p>#1: Masterplan Publish an agreed plan which is current, has measurable goals and time scales with identified owners.</p>
Our Core Values	3-Year Goals	<p>#2: People All partners provide relevant and empowered representatives supported by the full capability of their parent organisation</p>
<p>Ambitious for Our future Being creative and determined in exploiting the art of the possible in every opportunity.</p> <p>Being One team Continuously building trust whilst respecting our differences, within and outside the Partnership.</p> <p>Planning as One Team Being open and honest in envisioning our future by setting ambitious strategic objectives and goals, appropriately resourced to succeed</p> <p>Being proud to deliver Do what we say we will do and hold each other to account; don't dither – Deliver.</p> <p>Communicating as One Shared consistent narrative, demonstrating a commitment to the importance and value of the Partnership.</p>	<p>1: Economic Growth</p> <p>2: People/Communities</p> <p>3: Partnership Effectiveness</p> <p>4: Sustainability</p>	<p>#3: Funding Attract partner, public and private sector investment to deliver the masterplan.</p> <p>#4: Impact Deliver the masterplan, measure progress, and demonstrate results.</p> <p>#5: Profile Promote the region and the Partner</p>



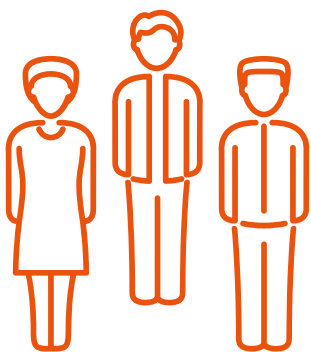
→ Next steps

With the numerous regional opportunities going ahead, the challenge to increasing employment in the short and medium term is less about project opportunities than in the past. More focus is needed to ensure enough of the right-skilled personnel are available in the region to meet the growing demand. To achieve this some of the support infrastructure will need to be enhanced to enable the working population to grow.

Therefore, emphasis will be placed upon building local capacity and capability, whilst continuing to pursue new development and Inward Investment opportunities. Without both strands being equally targeted the region won't be able to fully realise the potential benefits.

From the survey work, and discussions with local employers, there are three important themes, although the priority order of these vary from employer to employer depending on the nature of the business and location.

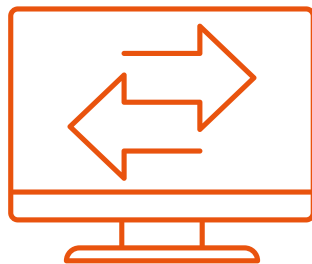
1



The need to increase the number of skilled personnel

(with the need to house new personnel being a recurrent theme)

2



Improving digital skills and connectivity

3



Enhancing the transport opportunities for employees

→ Focus North Strategy



To ensure a systematic and resource-efficient approach to progressing the key initiatives, a comprehensive action plan is being created.

Initiatives in development:

Talent attraction and Skills development

To meet the development opportunities highlighted a programme of work to increase the working population is being developed.

Focus North Strategy

Work has been initiated to look at skills and talent attraction issues led by Caithness Chamber of Commerce with the support of external resources. A series of workshops, individual consultations, fact finding and research is being used to establish baseline needs and issues. When complete a detailed work plan agreed between the partners involved will be enacted.

Strengthening the region's digital economy

Digital access in the region continues to improve, often ahead of the general perception of what is available locally, with upgrades being carried out incrementally and often with little public promotion. This improving connectivity offers opportunities to expand the regions digital economy and provide further employment opportunities including apprenticeships to provide additional ways into the digital world of work.

The global COVID pandemic has changed many businesses' approach to office-based working and forcing them to further develop their online presence. There are opportunities for businesses to further enhance their digital skills and benefits. There are various programmes within the region supporting the digital economy, and awareness raising and coordination of these plus potentially filling some gaps could accelerate this process.

Opportunities for expanding the digital economy

- Local businesses expanding their digital offering and employing more people and adding to the need for digital skills in the area, supporting this vital service industry
- Expanding apprenticeship opportunities
- Expanding the businesses locally based in the digital economy
- Increasing remote employment so more people can remain living in the region. This could offer opportunities to those who are constrained by childcare and/or travel issues to seek work through remote employment
- Attracting businesses by marketing the area for those seeking to develop location-independent businesses based in the region
- Attract individuals seeking to live in a more rural setting and can bring their work with them – bringing skilled people and their income to the region

Focus North Strategy

An action focused working group is being established, with key individuals from relevant partners, business, and academia. This group will scope and develop an agreed action plan with roles and responsibilities in consultation with local business needs and interested parties.

Transport

Changing transport needs post COVID-19 pandemic, and the imperative to decarbonise transport provide us with the opportunity to develop an innovative for future transport network in the region.

Focus North Strategy

Transport is a complex issue and multiple strands of activity are underway amongst partners, coordinated through Focus North. A demand study and an approach to develop alternative innovative solutions is being led by the Chamber of Commerce, in partnership with Highland Council's net zero and transport teams, whilst at the same time exploring how this can be supported through the Scottish Government's place-based pilot scheme.

Major projects

The region has multiple major project opportunities as outlined previously.

Focus North Strategy

Focus North will engage with projects where it can add value to facilitate a collaborative approach amongst partners, maximising local benefit. For example, with Sutherland Spaceport, which has been led by Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the partnership approach is to concentrate on developing the space cluster that will support this development. Other projects will be supported in similar ways which will be developed in conjunction with the project partners.



→ Closing Remarks

10

Councillor Raymond Bremner, Leader of the Highland Council who is also a councillor for Wick and East Caithness and is Chair of the Focus North Advisory Group said:

"Focus North's efforts signifies to me that there continues to be a real desire for partners to work together and make the absolute most of opportunities for businesses and our communities here in the north. It's so important that we maintain a drive to retain and grow the skill base, create further job opportunities, and continue supporting initiatives that attract investment, sustain local economic growth, reverse population decline and in all that we do, make it sustainable."

Outlining the vision of Focus North is its independent chair, Simon Middlemas OBE:

"There are really exciting opportunities opening up in the north at the moment across a wide range of industries where geography counts in our favour.

"However, collective local and national action is required to ensure we deliver these transformational initiatives, so the north of mainland Scotland generates growth, economic diversity, and leads the low carbon economy.

"We need the whole region to come together and drive forward the projects that will shape our future, and by working together with our partners we believe we can achieve something great for this area."

For more information visit focusnorth.scot

F O C U S
N O R T H
↑