

DSG Socioeconomic Subgroup

Focus North Programme Update

9 July 2024

General

In the past month various priorities have been progressed including the second meeting with Transport Scotland on the Public Service Obligation (PSO) at Wick.

Industry Forum

- Following the establishment of the Industry Forum in February, where collaboration was agreed, the first two areas of agreed collaboration identified are: -
 - A skills/talent/people strand – Produce a detailed skills map quantifying likely jobs/skills required across developments and indicative dates when these jobs will be required - Lead: Dounreay.
 - Examine existing community benefit approaches and consider how to align these to maximise investment and amplify impact in the region. Lead: Focus North team/Jacobs
- The meeting of the skills group on 20th June – the principal action agreed was to collate future employment numbers and job types needs from each of the partners. Focus North presented a paper on the wider skills landscape and how it relates to the wind and space industries. The conclusion is that there is no unified approach, and that the most productive way to engage is to understand local need, seek existing provision or develop new provision as needed locally.

Next steps –

- **Collate future employment numbers and job types needs from each of the partners.**
- **Focus North partnership to discuss how Industry Forum integrates with existing partnership structure (or how partnership structure adapts to support industry forum goals).**

Skills and Talent

Priority actions underway:

- **Skills Strategy / Innovation and Science Park:** DG members provided positive feedback to the Innovation and Science Park concept. This idea continues to develop with support from a University of Chester researcher, working alongside UHI (who have now employed a Low Carbon Hub co-ordinator) and other partners. The research looks at other models taking the 'quadruple helix' approach and is investigating funding opportunities.
 - **Melissa Spears of Chester University presented an update to Delivery group to highlight operational models for Innovation centres that had been adopted in other areas. Next step agreed is to bring key stakeholders together for a workshop to explore options to go beyond concept to a development plan.**

- **A bid to attract funding on partnership development that would support this concept has been submitted to UKRI with UHI as lead partner. Awaiting result – but as no date for interview has been offered yet this may not have been successful.**
- Regardless of the outcome of the Innovation and Science Park discussions, we have identified short term out skills actions and we are working with for the region:
 - **Net Zero Nation** – Strong, positive response with the first cohort of 15 organisations commencing the first programme on the 9th July. This group includes a good mix of businesses and social enterprises, with a wide range of sectors are represented: - Ardgay Game, Ashley Ann, Caithness Eng Services, JGC, Mackays Hotel, North Point Distillery, Berkshire Eng, Orbex, Wick Harbour, Wick Development Trust, PPP Wick, John O G Mill, Thurso Development Trust, GMG Engineering, Timespan.
 - **Privately subsidised apprenticeships** – launched by the Chamber of Commerce during Apprenticeship Week with initial funding from Dounreay to allow for enhanced support package for employers. Excellent news that an additional £50k has been secured from West of Orkney windfarm.
 - **Skills Transition Academy** – Focus North and Dounreay met with X-Academy to discuss potential for skills transition/graduate development programme locally. The X-Academy model provides 2 years' employment for trainees who then participate in tailored training and industry placements before moving into permanent energy jobs.
This approach could be combined with Powering Academy 'graduates' to expand the pathways that are available for local young people into employment.
 - **Talent attraction initiative** – Recruitment specialist supported by 3x1 developing Recruit North Highland website and employer toolkit. This has triggered a review of strategy and approach. The Recruit North Highlands brand and approach is being reappraised in light of discussions around how the Venture North destination management organisation might fit alongside the Chamber of Commerce.
 - **Powering Futures - [Powering Futures](#)** This is a 30 week level 6 (i.e. Higher equivalent) programme taught to 5/6th Year students. Its purpose is to raise awareness of sustainability and renewable energy opportunities whilst upskilling students in employability skills and improving confidence. **There is interest from Thistle wind to support this.**
- **Peatland restoration training ('For Peat's Sake')** Recruitment of attendees is going well – training to commence Sept at Forsinard. ['For Peat's Sake' | Focus North](#)

Next steps –

- **Ongoing discussions with X-Academy and how this might be taken forward through the Partnership.**
- **We have agreed to pursue the Powering Futures programme approach with individual schools through the DYW team to gauge interest. Individual company 'sponsors' would then be sought when schools are on board with the programme.**

Transport for employment.

Dounreay now leading this strand and meeting with Highland Council to discuss opportunities to collaborate and pilot level activities.

Space Industry Opportunities

HIE leading on space cluster development activities.

Peatlands restoration

Flow Country Partnership SCIO and the Subsidiary Flow Country Restoration Ltd have now been established and a formal launch event was held at Strathy village hall on 7th June.

PF continues to support Flow Country Partnership SCIO development. £240k from FIRNS (successor scheme to IRNS) & National Lottery Heritage fund, has allowed the recruitment of a **peatland restoration officer & a project officer** and two pilot schemes are now being progressed. Peatland Action grant submission for costs for both pilots now submitted. Discussions with crafting common grazings communities continued with a meeting in Tongue on Thursday (13th June).

To put this into context – total restoration cost for these two projects (over two years) is c£600k and both preferred bidders are local contractors - one who is expanding into peatland restoration for the first time. The two projects will ultimately save more than 2,600 t of CO2 emissions and generate c2,200 Carbon credits for sale per annum. Together these amount to c1,000 Ha of restoration of an estimated 180,000Ha degraded peatlands.

UNESCO world heritage site bid still awaits a decision which is expected in last week of July of this year. Technical advisory group has recommended inscription on 1 of the two categories applied for.

Next steps –

- **Mobilise organisation, management processes and operations for FCP Charity and FCR Ltd.**
- **Finalise external fund raising and investment – several discussions with potential investors underway.**
- **Identify ways to support WHS team as this is a requirement immediately after inscription. One project officer post currently hosted by Highland council, but ambition is to expand this team.**

Digital economy

Focus North is continuing in discussions with a potential edge **data centre**. It is felt that any digital strategy for the region would have the best chance of success if it grew from industry investment. A further enquiry for a larger scale development is also being supported.

Next steps - Further developments will be shaped by the results of these deliberations.

Focus North support for regional projects.

A dedicated working group has been established with Transport Scotland re: the Wick-Aberdeen PSO. Initial discussion centred on budget challenges. Further work is underway to develop a long-term plan for the Airport demonstrating its sustainable plan not only for the route but for the airport. Discussions with Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS) and the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) have identified the vital role WJoG could have in trialling the commercialisation of net Zero aviation technologies. These opportunities are being built into the business plan.

Next steps: -

- Commitment and resources needed to progress the work strands identified at pace.

Regional plans

Following post-event feedback, it was proposed that Focus North should consider and articulate a better defined regional 'vision.' However, we need to consider how these fit in with what are now multiple consultations being undertaken in the region.

- Place planning - discussions with HIE area team led by Highland Council, with a view to creating a Caithness and Sutherland place plan by the end of the year.
- Local living consultation issued by Highland Council. www.highland.gov.uk/localliving
- Highland Place Standard survey being undertaken by Highland Council. [Highland Place Standard Survey](#)
- Regional Economic Partnership draft strategy is to be consulted on.
- Several groups formed to look at community benefits - I'm Involved in the HIE/Highland Council group.
- Various statutory consultations ongoing around planning.
- A further consultation will be undertaken if the Flow Country UNESCO Bid is successful and there are any material variations as a result of inscription.

It is obvious we could spend a great deal of time being involved in consultations, but with limited resources it is important to engage appropriately with these important activities.

Promotion and awareness-raising.

Considerable progress has been made in regional promotion, including:

- Ambassadors – all promotional videos now published.
- Website development – website well received – more content added but yet more needed.
- Films and conference recording available on the website.
- The Advisory Board has called for a promotional and sharing event aimed more at third sector organisations to be held in the autumn. Planning for this is now underway. It has been agreed that the DSG should be involved in this event to promote the DSG's work and remit to these key stakeholders.

The final pieces of work undertaken by 3 x 1 are complete and this contract is concluded.

A procurement is being developed for small scale support beyond this contract, but procurement is proving challenging. A long-term solution needs to be identified.

Next steps –

- Capitalise on momentum from conference and seek to harness that positivity into action.
- **Identify how to support continued promotional activity post the 3 x 1 contract.**
- **Develop small scale event to share with community and 3rd sector organisations in autumn. Agree with community planning partnerships how to liaise and potentially joint deliver this. DSG to present to this event.**

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