

Local Advisory Committee Annual Report to the Board of Management

Chair: - Graham Birnie on behalf of LAC Northern. Date 19/03/2025

(1) What is going well?

The recruitment to the Northern LAC of local people with commitment and with networks within the local community has been a major success. It has allowed the LAC to have numerous sources of information and opportunities to engage in dialogue with a wide cross section of shareholders and the public, through an extremely difficult time of constant change over the merger implementation period.

The members of the LAC are now undertaking one to one discussions with staff members across all our campuses, a role previously carried out by the original pre-merged boards. This can be seen as an additional communication channel staff have access to. Support was given to the Principal and her Executive Team in all their efforts to have a relatively smooth integration with reinforcement of the messages that needed to get out to all staff and shareholders as well as the general public. This was backed by the members of the LAC to ensure that a LOCAL confirmation was underpinning the excellent communication strategy effective during the merger process.

The information being received by the LAC members through their individual contacts and networks is providing valuable information to the Business Development Teams. The resultant contact with the providers of future opportunities for college involvement is slowly becoming one of the main targets of the LAC.

(1a) What are the developments within your community of which the Board should be aware

The announcement the Dounreay site will now have a life until 2070 – allowing college students to start and finish a career at Dounreay, albeit in reduced numbers – provides jobs and allows personnel to stay in Caithness.

The implementation of the Orkney East and Orkney West electrical installation infrastructure e.g. the new battery stations being built by Murphy Construction in Caithness and the planned battery stations that they wish to build at Brora and Tain are major opportunities for the college to be involved in creating courses and skill sets that are needed for the future.

We await the decision of the Scottish Government on the construction of the new Coull Links Golf Course and supporting infrastructure.

We know UHI are potentially taking over Nigg, but we currently still have a presence there and in Alness and the development of the Cromarty Firth Green Freeport is a continuing opportunity for the college. Also, the expansion of Lion Volt and the saving of existing jobs in Caithness is good news.

Scrabster Harbour's involvement with offshore wind becoming a logistics hub for the construction of wind turbines and Wick harbour being the local office for the Beatrice Field wind turbines which continue to grow in number allows the college to fully utilise its green energy workshop and provide courses for the Renewable Energy sector employers. This applies, not only to Caithness but also further afield e.g. to Glasgow based students from SSE.

We need to tap in to the community funds that are being given large sums of money for use by the local community councils from the building of the windfarms in their area and we need to involve the college in any initiatives or projects into which our students could be included.

Members of the executive team are working closely with a range of developers and contractors involved in the renewable energy industry and we will be working with a 'Northern Developers Forum' to ensure we are ready to support the workforce required and maximise income from strategic and community funding

(2) What needs the Board's attention?

The feedback we received from staff, shareholders and general public was the misconception and prejudicial perception that the merger was a takeover by the West Highland College rather than a merger, despite a comprehensive communication plan being implemented across all campuses by various communication strategies.

This was exacerbated by not having a local member of the selection panels for various job interviews to allow the process to be perceived as fair and unbiased. This is a major learning point going forward in the selection of personnel for all jobs.

The Board is now seen as a remote entity and must make every effort to be visible across all our campuses. This is the biggest challenge for the Board due to the geographical spread and the amount of time required to achieve the goal, but to avoid being a Board that no one sees or has little or no contact with, it must be addressed.

(2a) Please give your assessment of the work of the College in relation to its community.

On a very positive note, we have growing numbers in ETEC Engineering, particularly with apprenticeships. This is due to well respected employer relationships. It is good that the merger didn't affect this, but it does depend on the former PLIs (whose role was removed from the merged structure) being able to maintain their employer engagement.

The employment open day where we had a record number of employers seeking new staff reflected the success of the college in getting across the desirability of being educated locally and, for the employees the benefit of courses giving them short block release or day release to continue their education while still remaining a productive staff employee.

The college open days were very well attended and having sessions at each of the campuses was a success in the number of school leavers continuing their education at the Northern Highland College and UHI.

The marketing and the public sell of the college capabilities continue to improve with the tremendous record of individual and college achievements being reflected in the public awareness of the success of the college students either through their academic achievements or through their involvement in local projects and initiatives.

(3) Set out any recommendations you may have to improve the College's effectiveness!

One of our main recommendations is that the Board actively takes action to reduce the levels of "disconnect" felt by staff across the geographical area. Given the huge area and complexity,

we are not sure how they do this but it's important they know there is still a problem, and we

as the LAC are more than willing to assist the Board in any actions they wish to take to alleviate the problem.

There are other ongoing issues with the merger: union dispute; staff “silo-ing”; the reduction in support and admin; and the reduction in CPD opportunities – the number of funded TQFE places having been cut to two, where this is the required qualification for all lecturers. The LAC believes the Principal and her executive team are addressing these issues and we await a positive outcome.

The complexity of the merger should not be underestimated and the position we are in now is a huge reflection of the excellent work of the Principal and the executive team who all worked long and hard to achieve the objectives within the agreed time frame. We must also commend the staff for their perseverance through this period.