

Local Advisory Committee Annual Report to the Board of Management

Chair: - Graham Birnie on behalf of LAC Northern. Date 11/3/2026

(1) What is going well?

Having completed the initial stages of the merger the executive team have implemented staff surveys and have taken immediate remedial action to address the issues raised by staff, this reflects the executive team's commitment to address the important challenges that occur during a change management process and recognises the importance of staff satisfaction to the success of the Merger.

The Recruitment of new committee members is progressing with Cathy Earnshaw and Peter Macrae joining the committee, both bringing unique areas of expertise to the committee. Peter comes from a background of Journalism and Broadcasting and Cathy's expertise is in Tourism and Hospitality

We are still seeking a student representative to be on the committee and a member that would reflect knowledge and community involvement on the eastern side (Wick) of the community.

Now we have Jim McGillivray covering the Dornoch area (Dornoch Campus) and Maureen Ross covering the Ross-shire area. (Alness campus).

(2) What are Developments within your community of which the board should be made aware.

Renewables

The proposed substation at Banniskirk has planning consent from Highland Council with onsite construction, likely to be by Murphys, due to start later this year. The substation is likely to employ around 500 people and the accommodation of these workers is subject to planning for a temporary "workers village" on the western edge of Thurso. Power from the substation, which will have DC and AC elements, will be exported via a 400kv overhead pylon line heading to Beaully and further by an underground DC cable to the east coast of Caithness, then undersea to Peterhead and into the electricity network. Incidentally work has begun on the undersea cable from Peterhead to Yorkshire.

The driver for this substation development is the proposed West of Orkney windfarm, which has all consents in place, and the East of Orkney windfarm which is going through the consenting process. The West of Orkney windfarm is up to 2 MW in size but has yet to commit to development due to the very high transmission charges that such projects currently bear. The developers, Total Energy and Corio, did not take part in the October 2025 contracts for difference AR7 round due to these high costs, which they publicly stated makes the development uneconomic. The East of Orkney Windfarm is a 900 MW floating wind project being promoted by the French company Quair Energy. They will face the same transmission cost challenges and further are using a relatively untried, at scale, technology in floating wind.

There are ongoing onshore wind projects being developed in Caithness and Sutherland such as Gollticlay, Strathy Wood and Strathy South. The last two projects are being delayed due to

grid connection issues. The Strathy Wood turbines have already been delivered to Scrabster but will be in storage on and off site until grid connection is resolved. There are also several battery storage proposals throughout the area, many of these may not be built out and again grid connection is an issue.

Scrabster Harbour

The harbour continues to grow in turnover and profit with a diverse income base from timber exports, oil and gas activity, ferry, fishing, and renewables. The onshore renewables activity has been greatly aided by the 2021 completion of the Ola Quay which also is encouraging more and larger cruise ships to visit the area. There is a potential for Scrabster to become an Operations and Maintenance base (O&M) for the offshore windfarms that are proposed but these have issues with increasing costs. The recent award of a contract for difference (CFD) for the Pentland project is positive and this floating wind project, developed by Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, is 6 turbines of up to 100 mw in overall output based 6 to 7 miles northwest of Dounreay. If this project goes ahead, then Scrabster should certainly benefit but the port will only ever be an O&M base due to limited space.

Natural Capital

Recent years have seen significant progress in raising national and international awareness of the Flow Country as a world-leading landscape for peatland restoration, community benefit and green finance innovation. The establishment of the Flow Country Partnership as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) in February 2024 has provided the legal and governance framework needed to scale restoration activity, manage the UNESCO World Heritage Site, and attract investment into carbon and ecosystem-service markets. Two initial restoration projects—covering roughly 1,000 hectares—are now complete, demonstrating a route to a self-sustaining restoration and carbon-credit model and positioning the Partnership for future investment opportunities. These developments present UHI - with its world leading position on Peatlands research - with growing opportunities for research collaboration, skills development, and place-based innovation aligned to the evolving Flow Country programme.

Thurso Transformation project.

The Thurso Pod/Transformation programme has continued to gather momentum, with the Highland Council Educational Point of Delivery (PoD) emerging as the anchor project (Estimated at £70-100m spend) within a wider portfolio of major investments set to reshape the town over the coming decade. This includes the replacement of Thurso High School, integration of community facilities, and the opportunity to develop a connected education campus to incorporate UHI's proposed Lifelong Learning Campus, the jointly-developed North Highland Innovation Centre, as well as the potential to house more than 200 staff from NRS Dounreay. The programme is overseen by the Thurso Transformation Delivery Group (TTDG), chaired by Highland Council, which brings together key regional partners—including Focus North, UHI, HIE, NHS Highland and NRS Dounreay—to coordinate planning, maximise shared benefits, and ensure alignment with wider economic and community priorities. Strong public engagement has reinforced the appetite for positive change, with consultations demonstrating broad support for modernised learning environments, improved community services, and clearer pathways for skills development and economic participation across Caithness and the wider North Highlands.

(3) What needs the board's attention.

Having completed the initial phases of the Merger the executive team and the board now focus on consolidation of the new structure and curriculum.

There are still several major areas of concern which we are sure the board is aware of but the lack of funding to bring the existing estate up to an acceptable standard and the lack of funding for capital projects is restricting the college from achieving its full potential.

As well as the challenges around capital funding I think it's important to note that lack of senior staff time to develop new opportunities is a major concern. With :- multiple major scale construction projects in the region over the next few years the opportunity to work with construction firms locally to develop provision and facilities is significant; The Pentland offshore wind farm demonstrator project could be a significant opportunity for subsea research and innovation being only 6 miles offshore; the lifelong learning campus and Innovation centre are a once in a generation opportunity to develop the Thurso campus; and the Flow Country WHS and FCP should act as a catalyst to enable significant expansion of research and training opportunities based in the north. With current resourcing it's really challenging to see how we could maximise these opportunities.

The recent initiative of the Executive team to set up a new subsidiary company to take over and run the Nigg Technical Training Centre is an excellent example of the entrepreneurial initiatives that recognises that the College and the community will benefit. We the LAC totally endorse this initiative and realise that the board has also fully supportive, we just hope that the UHI and Scottish Funding Council bureaucratic involvement does not jeopardise the implementation of an excellent community and college benefit.

We really think that the college and UHI have got significant opportunities, and it feels like we're in danger of being 'pennywise – pound foolish' if we don't resource developing these for the benefit of the college and the community.

(4) Our assessment of the work of the college in relation to its community.

There are several areas within all the Northern campuses that are achieving community integration.

The meeting of the Supported Learning students and their carers has been successfully running at the Thurso college campus for several years.

The tradition of providing learning support across all the campuses is reflected in the classes held at Thurso, Fort William, Portree, Ullapool and Stornoway yet are not well known in the community, when you are doing something well this should be publicised in the community. It is equally important that specialist needs be funded adequately.

The refurbishment of the Flagstones restaurant and its re-opening has been much appreciated by the local community. The restaurant at Burghfield Dornoch campus is again running successfully with the community having to book weeks in advance to get a table.

The school pupils attending from all the Caithness schools is another major success in allowing them to see what is available at the North, West and Highland College but also within the wider UHI.

The recent Jobs fair organised by Trudi Morris (LAC committee member) chair of the North Highland Chamber of Commerce and her team was an outstanding success held at the ETEC building on the Thurso campus. There were over 40 companies having a stand including the College attracting over 300 young adults and their parents looking to choose the way ahead. The fair was also attended by four of the LAC committee interacting with the companies and our potential students.

Although the Jobs Fair was a success, we are still receiving complaints that the college is not responding fast enough in providing the needs of the local tradesmen's requirements, which is understandable as the college cannot create instant courses without doing the research and having the funding. But a feedback mechanism must be put in place so that they know the college is not ignoring their requests.

Apprenticeships allow businesses to train people in their processes, their technology, and their culture. This not only addresses skills gaps but helps businesses grow with a workforce tailored to their needs. Since Covid we have seen a steady increase in the number of local employers taking on apprentices in a variety of disciplines. There has always been a healthy engineering apprenticeship programme underpinned by large employers such as NRS Dounreay and Rolls Royce, however, to sustain our local economy, we need to not only be responsive to the new opportunities and evolving renewable developments, but we also need to support traditional businesses which underpin the fabric of our communities such as our plumbers, electricians, mechanics, agricultural workers.

Local apprenticeship training provision is seen as a core activity of the college. So, if training is unavailable locally, many employers, especially our smaller employers, can often decide apprenticeships are too difficult to manage. Local provision makes it simpler, cheaper, and less disruptive. Caithness Business Fund is assisting with costs, by offering grants to employers, but some employers have had to send apprentices as far as the Central Belt to get training places.

When funding/resource constraints exist, there is an expectation that the college should be part of the solution and find alternative delivery mechanisms to increase local capacity.

(5) Recommendations that we believe will improve the boards effectiveness.

The allocation of two Main board members to attend the LAC Northern committee meetings is a welcome commitment from the board. With Shona and Iain attending it will allow closer communication and increased board awareness of what is going on in the local communities.

The Initiative from the board chair Derek Lewis of getting the LAC chairs together is already paying dividends with the New terms of reference for the LAC being agreed and implemented. The new terms of reference need to be circulated to staff and widely publicised.

We are awaiting a decision from the principal on our proposal to have a member of the executive designated as the focal point for each of the geographic areas this would probably be Debbie Miller - North, Hannah Ritchie-Muir - Outer Hebrides, Derek Bond - West. This would strengthen the Executive and be seen to have someone who is "local" and resident on campus.

The feedback we have received from staff covering several areas of the curriculum will be of interest to the board, we have assumed the Executive team are very aware of the successes and the concerns.

HE Creative Arts: The HE (apart from HNCs) delivery is largely blended learning with a focus on being able to offer access to as wide a geographically spread range of students as possible. This means that at undergraduate and postgraduate the numbers and delivery have not been affected by merger. The team are strengthening articulation routes (HND Art to Fine Art degree) and having one group of staff has allowed more staff from across UHI NWH to contribute to undergraduate teaching. As the Creative Arts does not offer straight forward routes to market the focus is on independence and portfolio careers and equipping students with the skills to navigate this sector.

HE Engineering: Similar to Creative Arts. They have been less affected by the merger since their degree courses were already networked across five UHI Academic Partners. And as they already have very flexible articulation and delivery for the engineering degrees, so student numbers continue to be good. They have also seen a positive change at HNC level, where we are now attracting a more geographical spread of students, and co-teaching, by blended learning, with Stornoway campus. However, they have been criticised for having less practical, on-site work, due to the merger enforcing more distance learning. This is also affecting local communities in that the popular evening classes, e.g., in welding, are no longer running. On a very positive note, the BEng (Hons) courses are on the verge of being accredited by the Engineering Council for IEng level. And the distance-learning, CEng accredited MScs continue to attract students across the globe.

HE Business etc: The HNC offering had moved to partnership working across UHI pre-merger, so the merger has not affected them at that level. However, there is not a lot of fair partnership working from Level 8 and above in Business and Hospitality. The business degree is largely taught by Inverness, and College staff have minimal opportunities to be part of it, and it is the same for Hospitality, as it is Perth led.

We as the LAC would like to see to a more widespread partnership working with a fairer spread of modules, but that might be constrained by UHI as they want the face-to-face approach in both areas to meet the international student criteria for funding.

Degree delivery is a concern for staff if we move ahead with full UHI Transformation as examples of how courses will be going forward, then how will degree courses be offered to rural communities if there is a move towards face-to-face teaching?