



Workforce North: **A shared mission to grow and expand our workforce**

Version 2.0 - August 2025



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Ambition Statement

Over the next 10 to 15 years, the Highlands and Islands are set to benefit from over £100 billion in investment, driven by renewable energy generation, transmission and distribution. This presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform the regional economy. However, with a declining and aging population, the region faces a significant workforce challenge. To capitalise on these investments, it is estimated that the workforce would require at its peak an additional 16,250 people. It is therefore crucial that the region builds the workforce, achieved through a collaborative co-investment approach from partners in the Highlands and Islands.

Workforce North aims to deliver on this ambition through five workstreams*:

- An extensive campaign to engage and inspire all pupils in our schools and individuals in our communities across the Highlands and Islands to better understand and respond to the scale of opportunities, growing a sustainable future talent pipeline.
- Developing the future workforce by expanding experiential career learning, increasing FA provision and improving access to work-based learning job opportunities via focussed interventions in schools and communities.
- Expanding apprenticeships through co-investment in industry led vocational, technical and apprenticeship provision, significantly increasing the numbers of young people in vocational & apprenticeship pathways.

- Increased upskilling and reskilling initiatives through public and industry collaboration to increase the number of individuals able to respond to the emerging economic opportunities
- A major talent attraction and retention programme to entice working-age people to the region and encourage those who have left to return.
(*Timelines and targets on deliverables to be agreed with partners)

This draft plan has been developed as an initial framework for action. We are actively seeking further input from stakeholders in the region to further refine these actions.

We recognise that further engagement with communities across the Highlands and Islands is required and we look forward to building this engagement in the weeks ahead.

The journey so far

The Workforce North Mission was established in response to a CoHI action agreed in Autumn 2024, addressing an urgent need to grow the workforce based on replacement and expansion demand evidence. Recognising the enormous pressures on public finances this mission sought to enable a new model of co-investment, combining employer investment in workforce development with publicly funded skills provision to build the workforce needed to drive economic growth. The power of collaborative partnership and co-investment is critical to maximising the return on every pound spent and in doing so, this mission set out to deliver a lasting legacy for the people and businesses of the region.

An initial Workforce Summit event was held on 4 April 2025 which included employers, inward investors and public sector decision makers. Insights and extensive feedback from the event have resulted in the identification of the above 5 themes including a high-level plan on a page, suggested 'road map' template and is ready to be used to inform further work with local authorities to ensure we progress rapidly from planning into action to address the critical workforce challenges.

Moving Forward

Working in partnership with local authorities and others across the Highlands and Islands the following will be undertaken:

- Identify a local authority partnership operational group to produce detailed 'road maps' by mapping out work breakdown structures, identifying lead roles, documenting critical KPIs as well as monitoring progress.
- Establishment of an employer group to ensure efficiency of delivery and support with identifying appropriate co-investment opportunities

Governance

Formal governance is to be through the HIREP, via the Labour and Skills Subgroup, and CoHI. This will ensure alignment is retained with the skills elements of the HIREP Regional Economic Strategy, currently in development.

Programme Management Office resource will be identified to take forward detailed planning and implementation.

Workforce North - High Level Plan

| Theme | Priority Deliverables | Medium-Term Deliverables | Long-Term Deliverables |
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| Extensive Campaign Enabling our schools & communities to better understand the scale of local opportunity | 1.1 Develop & deliver local promotional packages i.e. 'My Highland Future' | | |
| School & Wider Community Focus Generating the future workforce and improving access to fair work opportunities | 2.1 Expand & embed Experiential Career Learning (ECL) | 2.4 Improve work experience offer & identify challenges | 2.6 Gather, analyse & monitor young peoples' career aspirations |
| | 2.2 Promote work-based learning pathways and their benefits | 2.5 Create local 'Workforce Response Teams' (PACE in reverse) | 2.7 Create a single, localised one-stop online application portal for WBL |
| | 2.3 Rapidly expand FA offer in schools | 2.8 Establish clearing system for unsuccessful WBL applicants | 2.10 Increase availability of work experience linked to guaranteed job interviews |
| | | 2.9 Expand pre-employment schemes that include guaranteed interviews | |
| | | 2.11 Make access to future fair work economic opportunities equitable | |
| Apprenticeship Expansion Develop new approaches to deliver an expanded offer | 3.1 Increase MA starts in line with evidenced need | 3.2 Implement more flexible apprenticeship delivery models | 3.4 Explore opportunities to expand private sector provision where public sector is unable to meet demand |
| | 3.3 Ensure institutions have infrastructure and capacity to deliver required training in priority areas. | 3.6 Influence local CWB Action Plans to consider WBL in procurement | |
| | 3.5 Expand GA offer | | |
| Upskilling / Reskilling Short, sharp opportunities for those seeking a new role | 4.5 Creation of upskilling/reskilling co-ordinators | 4.1 Design & deliver short, sharp training offers for those changing roles & returning to the labour market | 4.1 Scope out need for increase in Private Sector Training provision where public sector is unable to meet demand |
| | | 4.3 Consider options to increase the number of internships | |
| | | 4.4 Creation of job access fund / low interest loan scheme | |
| Talent Attraction and Retention Encouraging people to return home & attract new people to the area | 5.1 Attract working age people through a UK and international campaign | 5.2 Attract & retain HE candidates to the region | 5.3 Develop an advanced visa programme & improved visa processes |

Workforce North - Example (LA) Road Map

| Theme 3: Apprenticeship Expansion | Identifying appropriate frameworks, delivery methods & numbers required | | | | Ensuring delivery | | | | | | Apprenticeship uptake | | |
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| Actions | Complete labour market analysis, including numbers required and barriers to uptake | Identify appropriate frameworks required | Develop additional frameworks where required | Develop flexible delivery models as evidenced. | Build knowledge & understanding across employers to secure buy-in | Explore CWB procurement opportunities as a route to increase WBL opportunities | Work with training providers / HEIs to ensure required offer is available | Secure required funding and credit availability | Scope out expansion to private sector provision where public sector can't meet demand | Identify & address provider barriers to delivery | Build knowledge & understanding of WBL across talent pipeline & key influencers | Map & market out alignment from FA to MA / GA | Support employers to recruit apprentices |
| Partners | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| KPIs | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Budget | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Timeline | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3.1 Increase MA starts in line with evidenced need | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 3.3 Ensure institutions have infrastructure and capacity to deliver required training in priority areas. | | | | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | |
| 3.5 Expand GA offer | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 3.2 Implement more flexible apprenticeship delivery models | | | | ✓ | | | | | | | | | |
| 3.6 Influence local CWB Action Plans to consider WBL in procurement | | | | | | ✓ | | | | | | | ✓ |
| 3.4 Explore opportunities to expand private sector provision where public sector is unable to meet demand | | | | | | | | | ✓ | | | | |

| Action | Potential delivery partners | Success measures | Success measures | Significant Risks |
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| Theme 1: Extensive Campaign Enabling our schools and communities to better understand the scale of the local opportunity. | | | | |
| 1.1.1 Develop and deliver local promotional packages aimed at schools and communities to highlight future economic opportunities and help secure future talent pipeline. Deliver a campaign with a local feel (e.g. My Highland Future / My Moray Future / My Orkney Future etc.) targeted at: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> pupils (primary and secondary) parents & carers teachers key influencers wider community. Ensure campaign is equitable, highlighting opportunities for all and positively targeting specific groups as appropriate – see examples such as ‘You can’t be it if you can’t see it’ (Youth Highland Report). | Employers schools, DYW, SDS CIAG, UHI MCR Pathways. | Campaign delivered in every LA across Highlands and Islands. Participation Portal preferred routes and occupations demonstrating demand aligned to local labour market. Annual school leaver destination results showing an increase in school leavers progressing into local opportunities. | Lack of clarity around timelines for new work. | Greater understanding of opportunities across all equalities groups. |
| Theme 2: School & Wider Community Focus Generating the future workforce and improving access to fair work opportunities | | | | |
| 2.1 Expand & embed Experiential Career Learning (ECL) activity aligned to future economic opportunities in the curriculum and wider community by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mapping current ECL provision Co-designing new/ additional ECL Maximise employer engagement across schools and communities. | SDS (T27 activity), Industry, Schools, DYW, LEP. | Increase in number of pupils engaged in ECL. ECL activity in schools & communities, aligned to the local labour market, firmly embedded across the curriculum. | Engagement level of schools and industry. Lack of time within school curriculum. | Ensure ECL activity meets the needs of and is appropriate to all equalities groups with a particular emphasis on addressing sectoral imbalances such as gender. |

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| <p>2.2 Promote work-based learning pathways and their benefits (FAs, MAs and GAs) to parents, carers, teachers, young people and key influencers.</p> | DYW, SDS CIAG, schools. | Increase in the number of people progressing into FAs, MAs and GAs. | <p>Societal bias towards traditional university education.</p> <p>Lack of buy-in from parents, teachers, carers, young people.</p> | Increased promotion across equalities groups. |
| <p>2.3 Rapidly expand FA offer in schools, aligned to future economic opportunities (e.g. consider approaches taken in Aberdeenshire Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar)</p> <p>Exploring and overcoming:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attainment/Sustainment Measures • Timetabling conflicts • Transport • Pre-apprenticeship programmes. | LAs, DYW, SDS, schools, employers, UHI, SFC. | Increase in number and breadth of FAs delivered by schools. | Current levels of apprenticeship funding insufficient to meet the future demands of the workforce. | Strong representation across equalities groups in FA completion rates. |
| <p>2.4 Improve work experience offer and identify challenges through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing 'Apprentice for a Day' model • UHI work placement guarantee exploration • Addressing critical barriers such as: • Risk assessment processes • Funding • Employer engagement • Timetabling. | LAs, DYW, Employers. | Increase in pupils undertaking work experience & Apprentice for a Day uptake across all LAs | <p>Resource and budget for risk assessment completion.</p> <p>Lack of ability to accommodate within school timetabling.</p> | Strong representation across equalities groups with specific targeting to address sectoral imbalance. |
| <p>2.5 Create local 'Workforce Response' teams (PACE in reverse) to generate short-life industry campaigns in response to increased workforce sector demands including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pop-up recruitment shops • Targeted industry engagement sessions • Webinars • Social media campaigns • Podcasts. | DYW, SDS, Employers, DWP, PACE. | Workforce response partnerships in operation in all LAs. | Partner availability. | Responses meet the needs of different equalities groups. |

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| 2.6 Gather, analyse and monitor young peoples' career aspirations and alignment to future economic opportunities to inform above work. | Schools, SDS E&R and E&I, DYW. | High response rate to Pupil Voice survey. Clear understanding of alignment between local labour markets and pupils' career aspirations. | Low response rate to ensure data is viable. | Response rates include high percentage of individuals across equalities groups. |
| 2.7 Create a single, localised one-stop online portal, for all to be able to view and apply for local WBL opportunities giving consideration to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MA/GA Exploration of alignment to pre-approval apprenticeship scheme Clear explanation of application process Vacancies outlining future career progression options Adoption of clearing system for unsuccessful candidates Exploring current challenges with apprenticeship.scot salary requirements. | DWP, DYW, Employers, LAs, UHI, CIAG. | Number of employers posting opportunities on single access point for all local work-based learning opportunities. Number of individuals using single access point for all local work-based opportunities. Increase in vacancy response rates across sector and business size. | Costs associated and potential commercial approaches. | Portal meets the needs of island communities and shows high usage across equalities groups. |
| 2.8 Establish a [UCAS style] clearing system for unsuccessful WBL applicants and redundant apprentices to link with other employers. | NMIS, CITB, SDS, major contractors, supply chains. | Scheme host identified. Apprentices successfully placed through the established scheme. Employers participating in the scheme. Majority positive feedback from apprentices/employers involved in the scheme. Reduction in redundant apprentices not able to complete training. | Commercial sensitivities and competitiveness can inhibit transparency around training opportunities. | Clearing meets the needs of island communities and shows high usage across equalities groups. |

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| 2.9 Expand pre-employment schemes that include guaranteed interviews (e.g. CECA) to increase talent pipeline for those with barriers to employment. | LEPs, CECA, employers. | <p>Volume of guaranteed interviews.</p> <p>Number of people accessing fair work via pre-employment schemes.</p> <p>Increase in those out of work moving into employment.</p> | Some recruitment practices may be restricted. | Participant rates include high percentage of individuals across equalities groups particularly those facing barriers to employment. |
| 2.10 Increase availability of work experience linked to guaranteed job interviews to improve access to fair work. | LEPs, LAs, employers, SDS, UHI. | <p>Work experience places provided.</p> <p>Guaranteed job interviews provided.</p> | Employer time commitment to complete the required risk assessments. | Participant rates include high percentage of individuals across equalities groups. |
| 2.11 Make access to future fair work economic opportunities more equitable utilising: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equalities Councils' advice, guidance and support • LEPs • DWP training and disability confident schemes • Mentoring schemes. | LEPs, LAs, DWP, MCR Pathways. | <p>Reduction in unemployment and underemployment.</p> <p>% of individuals from equalities groups in employment are increased.</p> | Successful approaches do not have the required funding. | Increased % of individuals from equalities groups are able to enter into fair work employment opportunities. |

Theme 3: Apprenticeship Expansion

Enabling our schools and communities to better understand the scale of the local opportunity.

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| 3.1 Increase in MA starts in line with evidenced need , achieved through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • additional SDS funding • SFC providing FE credits in college and public sector training academies • Exploring potential for a proportion of small employers' industry levy (e.g. CITB) to be ringfenced for delivery in the region • Encouraging industry-led provision where appropriate. | SDS, SFC, Employers, UHI, Training Providers. | Increased MA starts, aligned to local employer needs. | Lack of Scottish Government funding. | Participant rates include high percentage of individuals across equalities groups. |
| 3.2 Implement more flexible apprenticeship delivery models , including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a focus on micro-credentialling • partial apprenticeships • UHI Apprenticeship+ model • increased digital provision to support uptake in rural and island areas. • develop and deliver offers such as augmented and virtual reality training in emerging sectors/technologies using industry investment. | Employers, SDS, SFC, UHI, Training Providers. | <p>Increased MA starts, aligned to local employer needs.</p> <p>Increase in digital provision across critical skills areas.</p> | Lack of investment to research, develop and implement new approaches. | Delivery models see an increase in % uptake across equalities groups. |

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| 3.3 Ensure institutions have infrastructure and capacity to deliver required training in priority areas. Ensuring appropriate level of SFC credits. | UHI, SFC, SDS, RGU, HW. | Required training across Highlands & Islands is funded and in place. | Lack of funding available to improve capacity. | Individuals within equalities groups have access to appropriate training. |
| 3.4 Explore opportunities to expand private sector provision where public sector is unable to meet demand. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider current provision such as CITB construction skills academy. | SDS, CITB, Training Providers. | CITB Construction Skills Academy, engineering training and private-sector training provision available for use. | Lack of funding available to improve capacity Lack of private sector availability to meet additional demand. | Individuals within equalities groups have access to appropriate training. |
| 3.5 Expand Graduate Apprenticeship offer aligned to future economic opportunities. | UHI, SFC, RGU, Herriot Watt. | Expansion of GA frameworks offered. Increase in number of H&I residents completing GAs. | Current levels of apprenticeship funding insufficient to meet the future demands of the workforce. | Strong representation across equalities groups in FA completion rates. |
| 3.6 Influence local Community Wealth Building Action Plans to consider WBL in procurement contracting to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> deliver fair work increase work-based learning opportunities encourage industry investment in upskilling and reskilling. | LAs, CWB partners, Employers, CICs. | Fair work principles built into community benefits. Increase in 1 apprentice for every £1m of private and public sector procurement. | Lack of clarity around timelines for projects. | Apprenticeship opportunities realised are accessible and promoted to key equalities groups. |

Theme 4: Upskilling / Reskilling

Short, sharp opportunities for those seeking a new role.

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| 4.1 Design and deliver short, sharp training offers for those changing roles and returning to the labour market. Build into a skills prospectus. | UHI, Training Providers, employers. | Increase in upskilling / reskilling opportunities. Skills prospectus available to ensure easy access to understanding availability. | Lack of funding and resource to design, develop & deliver additional upskilling / reskilling opportunities. | Upskilling / Reskilling offer meets the needs of equalities groups. |
| 4.2 Scope out need for increase in Private Sector Training Provision where public sector is unable to meet demand. Considering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> existing best practise (e.g. East Kilbride Training Group etc) benefits of establishing Centres of Excellence industry investment in development of private sector training. | Private training providers. | Additional training facilities and Centres of Excellence available to deliver additional required training provision. | Lack of funding available to improve capacity. Lack of private sector availability to meet additional demand. | Individuals within equalities groups have access to appropriate training. |
| 4.3 Consider options to increase the number of internships (NMIS model with employer contributions). | NMIS, employers, local authorities, UHI. | Increase in internship places. | Industry capacity to offer increased internships. | Internship offer meets the needs of equalities groups. |
| 4.4 Creation of [industry-led and/or funded] job access fund / low interest loan scheme for upskilling and reskilling, aligned to priority sectors. | TBC | Improved funding scheme in place for upskilling / reskilling. | Lack of funding available to improve capacity. Lack of private sector availability to meet additional demand. | Individuals within equalities groups have access to appropriate training. |
| 4.5 Creation of upskilling/reskilling co-ordinators to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with employers to identify skills gaps in potential candidate(s) Establish employer funding contribution requirements Identify appropriate training programme(s) Support candidate application for training and funding if required. | Employers, UHI, private training providers, local authorities. | Increased number of individuals accessing alternative/improved employment opportunities through upskilling / reskilling routes. | Lack of funding to implement co-ordinator role Lack of appropriate upskilling / reskilling training Lack of suitable funding options. | Increased % of individuals from equalities groups accessing new / improved employment opportunities. |

Theme 5 – Talent Attraction and Retention

Encouraging people to return home and attract new people to the area

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| <p>5.1 Attract working age people through UK and international campaign by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting area attractiveness Encouraging young people to return to the area. Utilising businesses to create core messaging linked to timeline for skills required Promoting wide range of job opportunities for partners and wider family members Establishing support system to help potential applicants who wish to apply to the region. | Employers, REP partners, Visit Scotland. | Agreed campaign is in place and increasing numbers moving into the Highlands and Islands. | Attractive employment opportunities are not promoted along with the campaign. | Upskilling / Reskilling offer meets the needs of equalities groups. |
| <p>5.2 Attract & retain HE candidates to the region through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specialist and research degrees, which can help attract people to the region Promotion of specialist MSc and PhD programmes in the region Expansion of 'Graduate into Industry' schemes in priority sectors, with a focus on SMEs. | HEIs | Increase in students completing degrees choosing to return / stay in the region. | <p>Lack of funding available to improve capacity</p> <p>Lack of private sector availability to meet additional demand.</p> | Individuals within equalities groups have access to appropriate training. |
| <p>5.3 Develop an advanced visa programme and improve visa processes through establishing links with Scottish Migration Service.</p> | Scottish Migration Service. | Increase in inward migration to the Highlands & Islands to take up training & employment opportunities. | Lack of alignment between inward migration policies and need to attract and retain overseas candidates to the Highlands and Islands. | Visa programmes attract increased % of individuals from equalities groups. |



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