

Agenda Item	8
Report No	HC/07/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Highland Council

Date: 26 March 2026

Report Title: Workforce North Co-Investment Fund

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Workforce North Co-investment Fund, formally announced by the Deputy First Minister on 28 October 2025, represents a major step in addressing the Highlands and Islands' critical workforce supply challenges. The Fund is being launched with up to £2 million of seed investment from Skills Development Scotland (SDS), creating a platform to leverage further local authority and private-sector investment across the region, aimed at expanding, upskilling, and strengthening the regional workforce.
- 1.2 The Highland Council is a pivotal driver of the Workforce North Co-investment Fund and is instrumental to its successful delivery across the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership (HIREP) area. As both a major investor and the designated lead partner, the Council provides the strategic leadership, administrative capacity, and regional coordination necessary to underpin this ambitious programme. The Council has committed £1.6 million to Workforce North, comprising £1.2 million in match funding to stimulate employer-led workforce development and £402,000 to establish and resource the dedicated posts required to manage and deliver the programme effectively. This level of commitment clearly demonstrates the Council's proactive role in shaping the region's long-term economic prosperity, championing skills development, and ensuring that Highland communities are positioned to fully benefit from the unprecedented scale of investment and opportunity expected over the coming years.
- 1.3 The Co-investment Fund is designed to support a coordinated, system-wide approach to workforce development, recognising the scale of economic opportunity presented by up to £100 billion of expected investment across the region over the next 15 years, largely driven by renewable energy generation and transmission infrastructure. To ensure Highland communities and employers can benefit from this unprecedented investment, the fund will prioritise initiatives that directly support talent development and retention.
- 1.4 The Co-investment Fund provides a transformative opportunity to mobilise joint public-private investment at scale, accelerate workforce growth, and ensure the Highlands is equipped to meet its near- and long-term labour market demands. As part of this, the development and expansion of sector-focused Skills Academies through the Workforce

North programme will play a critical role in delivering rapid, employer-led training in priority industries such as renewable energy and construction, strengthening the region's capacity to respond to rising skills needs linked to major planned investment

- 1.4 This report provides Members with an update on the establishment of the Fund and the role of the Council as Accountable Body.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:-

- i. **Note** the update on the Workforce North Co-Investment Fund and its proposed operation;
- ii. **Note** that the Highland Council will act as Lead Partner and Accountable Body for the funding;
- iii. **Agree** that authority is delegated to the Assistant Chief Executive - Place, in consultation with the Chair of Economy and Infrastructure, to undertake the actions required to establish and implement the Workforce Co-Investment Fund as per the grant terms entered with SDS; and
- iv. **Agree** that progress will be reported to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee, through the update reports related to the My Highland Future Delivery Plan Portfolio.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - A total of £2m seed funding will be made available from Skills Development Scotland to the Council (as Accountable Body). The funding model is predicated on a 50/50 financial split, with the eligible employer covering 50% of the eligible costs and the local authority/SDS seed capital the remaining 50% on an equal basis (**Appendix 1**).
- 3.2 The seed funding provided by SDS is intended to be flexible. It does not have to be fully allocated or spent per financial year and can be carried forward to enable future activity. However, full spend does need to be achieved by 31 March 2029.
- 3.3 As the Accountable Body, the Council will be responsible for the management of these public funds and undertaking due diligence on behalf of those other local authorities in the Workforce North geographical region:
- Argyll & Bute Council
 - Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
 - Moray Council
 - Orkney Islands Council
 - Shetland Islands Council, and
 - the islands of Arran and Cumbraes (North Ayrshire Council)
- 3.4 The Economic Development and Regeneration Service will work closely with SDS to develop and embed appropriate controls and processes for funding. The Service is experienced in managing funding programmes to third party organisations on behalf of governments, including the Inverness and Highland City Region Deal, the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport, UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Scottish Government's Place Based Investment Programme.

- 3.5 **Legal** - As the Accountable Body for the funds at the start of the Programme, the Council is responsible for ensuring that all funds are managed in line with the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty. It will also be responsible for compliance with subsidy control and procurement legislation.
- 3.6 **Risk** – There is a risk that the Workforce North Co-investment Fund may not secure the level of private-sector contributions anticipated, limiting overall investment impact, while capacity constraints across training providers and employers could hinder delivery at the required scale. Ongoing demographic challenges—including a declining working-age population—may restrict workforce uptake, and effective alignment between multiple regional partners will be essential to avoid fragmentation or duplication. Additionally, shifts in wider economic conditions could reduce projected labour demand, and failure to demonstrate early outcomes may pose reputational risks for the Council.
- 3.7 To mitigate these risks, the Council will work with partners to establish clear governance arrangements, phased delivery targets, and an early-wins programme that secures employer commitments upfront, strengthens provider capacity, and ensures transparent monitoring to maintain confidence and momentum.
- 3.8 **Health and Safety** (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) – None arising from this report.
- 3.9 **Gaelic** – None arising from this report.

4 Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children’s Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This report provides an update on the establishment of the Workforce Co-investment Fund and therefore an impact assessment is not required. An impact assessment will be required on finalisation of the programme.

5 Workforce North Co-Investment Fund – Background

- 5.1 Workforce North is a regional mission established to ensure the Highlands and Islands can fully realise the benefits of the £100 billion of anticipated investment expected over the next 15 years, primarily driven by renewable energy generation and transmission. The initiative brings together key partners—including Skills Development Scotland, The Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, UHI, the Scottish Funding Council, and Inverness & Cromarty Firth Green Freeport—to address significant workforce supply challenges through a coordinated, place-based approach. Its purpose is to grow, attract and retain the skilled workers required to support large-scale infrastructure programmes and to ensure communities across the region can access the resulting economic opportunities.

5.2 As part of the Workforce North launch, the Deputy First Minister announced the creation of the Workforce North Co-investment Fund, supported by up to £2 million of seed investment from Skills Development Scotland. The Fund is designed to leverage additional public and private-sector contributions to accelerate workforce expansion, support employer-led training activity, and address immediate and emerging skills needs linked to regional investment programmes. The Highland Council will act as lead partner, responsible for managing the fund, ensuring compliance with eligibility criteria, and coordinating delivery through the formal governance structure involving SDS and Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

6 Workforce North Co-Investment Work Streams

6.1 The Workforce North Programme is structured around three complementary funding streams designed to address both immediate and longer-term workforce requirements across the Highlands and Islands. Together, these streams provide a balanced framework for rapid workforce growth, innovation in delivery models, and scaling of proven approaches, ensuring the region is equipped to meet the skills demands associated with major investment, particularly in renewable energy and key technical sectors - and enabling strategic collaboration with regional education providers such as the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) to strengthen training capacity and talent pipelines.

6.2 Funding Stream 1 – Workforce Growth

The Workforce Growth stream focuses on delivering rapid, employer-led skills development where immediate training demand and delivery capacity already exist. This stream supports quick-win, low-risk activity including fast-entry training for unemployed or career-changing individuals, apprenticeship recruitment, and targeted upskilling aligned to urgent workforce needs. It is designed to provide a flexible response to short-term labour market pressures while enabling employers to address identified skills gaps quickly and effectively.

Example employer journey

- A small business with three staff wants to grow but taking on apprentice feels like a costly move
- They apply to the fund and receive £5k to help cover the costs of taking on an apprentice. In return, they commit to paying the apprentice's wages
- Simple, fast, and helps the business to grow and create a new job in their region

6.3 Funding Stream 2 – Workforce Innovation

The Workforce Innovation stream aims to develop and test new workforce delivery models in areas where uncertainty, barriers or unproven approaches exist. This includes piloting new apprenticeship pathways, technology-enabled delivery solutions, transition models for priority groups, and innovative training approaches that address industry-specific challenges. The stream is focused on generating scalable, evidence-based solutions that can improve system performance and inform longer-term workforce planning across the region

Example employer journey

- An employer finds that their current approach to training is not meeting their skills needs

- They team up with their local training provider to design and pilot a new model to address the skills gaps
- The fund matches their investment, giving them the space to test, learn, and improve without taking all the risk

6.4 Funding Stream 3 – Workforce Accelerator

The Workforce Accelerator stream supports the expansion of proven training models to meet urgent or high-volume workforce needs. It is designed to scale up and roll out successful pilots from the Innovation stream and deliver rapid upskilling programmes in critical shortage areas. This stream ensures that effective workforce solutions can be deployed quickly and consistently across the region, strengthening the labour pipeline for employers and supporting immediate workforce requirements.

Example employer journey

- The stream 2 pilot was a success. Other employers in different sectors and areas are asking how they can do the same
- Businesses and training providers come together to roll out the model at scale, through a shared programme or sector academy
- The fund backs the expansion through co-funding, delivering greater regional impact

7 **Governance**

7.1 Governance of the Workforce North Co-investment Fund is overseen through a formal Project Approval Board, comprising representatives from The Highland Council, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). The Board operates on a collaborative, co-decision basis, with all Project Applications circulated to each member for assessment against agreed criteria, and decisions taken by majority approval. The Council, as lead partner is responsible for ensuring that applications, amendments, monitoring information and compliance reports are processed in line with the governance framework, and that all activities adhere to the Memorandum of Understanding and the principles of transparency, accountability, and timely communication required of Board members. This structure provides a clear mechanism for oversight, risk management, and joint assurance across all participating partners.

7.2 The Highland Council's developing contractual obligations with partner local authorities under the Workforce North Training Fund Memorandum of Understanding are centred on its role as lead partner and fund administrator. In this capacity, the Council is responsible for the ongoing refinement of programme administration arrangements, including fund management, the maintenance of governance and decision-making structures, and the coordination of project assessment and delivery in line with the partnership principles set out within the MoU. Partner authorities, operating as Workforce North Councils, are correspondingly expected to contribute to the co-funding of eligible projects, to participate in collaborative governance processes, and to deploy appropriate resources in support of the region's shared workforce-development objectives. These arrangements remain subject to continued development as the framework is further implemented and operationalised.

8 Reporting

- 8.1 As lead partner for of the Workforce North Co-investment Fund, The Highland Council must provide quarterly reports to Skills Development Scotland, detailing funding approvals, delivery progress, expenditure, performance against outputs and milestones, and any delivery risks or compliance issues. In addition, the Council is required to provide monthly performance and financial updates, participate in ongoing monitoring meetings. An Annual Summary Report and a Final Report must also be submitted, setting out cumulative commitments, expenditure, and achievement of outcomes across the full programme period. Annual reports will also be provided to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

9 Growing the Fund

- 9.1 The Workforce North Co-investment Fund presents substantial potential to leverage significant additional investment in regional skills development and workforce retention. The initial seed contribution from Skills Development Scotland is intended to act as a catalyst to attract further co-investment from organisations with a strategic interest in the region's labour market. In parallel, The Highland Council's £1.2 million commitment is designed to crowd in further private and public sector contributions, particularly from the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport, partners to the Highland Social Value Charter, and Tier 1 contractors operating within the area. This combined approach aims to maximise the scale and impact of the fund while strengthening long-term workforce resilience across the Highlands.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 13 March 2026

Author: Alan Webster – Service Lead – Economic Development & Regeneration

Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 - Workforce North Co-Investment Fund
Summary Presentation
Appendix 2 – Workforce North Plan on a Page

Workforce North Co-investment fund

Employer-led | Co-invested | Regionally Inclusive

A framework for employer-led action across immediate, innovative and scalable workforce solutions



2m seed funding



Stream 1 - Grow

Immediate response:

Pipeline, upskilling and apprenticeship incentives



Stream 2 - Innovate

Strategic Exploration:

Developing future-focused workforce solutions



Stream 3 - Accelerate

Strategic Execution:

Scaling proven solutions for regional impact



A framework for action



Purpose: Expand the regional workforce to unlock economic growth.

Enabling: Co-investment in practical, employer-led workforce development.

How it works: A repeatable framework for shared public–private investment, aligned to employer demand.



A Hybrid Model | Structure, Rationale and Alignment

Rationale for a hybrid approach:

- Balances **rapid response and quick wins** with longer-term **strategic value-add**.
- Provides a **pipeline from pilot to practice**—proof of concept from streams 2+3 have potential to scale via stream 1
- Offers flexibility around funding allocations i.e. virement between streams in response to demand / performance on a first come first served basis

Funding Stream	WFN delivery role	WFN operating plan alignment	Illustrative delivery / activity	My Highland Future alignment
1. GROW <i>(Quick-win, rules-based, transactional delivery)</i> <i>Tightest eligibility and least discretion</i>	Immediate delivery against known demand/need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme 1: Converting campaign reach into participation / progression • Theme 2: School leaver and early pipeline entry • Theme 3: MA starts above baseline • Theme 4: Short upskilling / reskilling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short SCQF-levelled/certified training blocks linked to live vacancies/employer need • Trade and industry certification (e.g. safety, technical, compliance) • MA recruitment and retention incentives (<i>incl. adopt an apprentice / ERI-type interventions</i>) • Rapid entry-to-work training for unemployed or career-changing adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pipeline Development • Employer & MA Support • Upskilling & Transition
2. INNOVATE <i>(New models, pilots and innovation activity)</i>	Developing and/or testing new delivery models where barriers, opportunities, or uncertainty exist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme 2: FA / ECL delivery models, WBL access • Theme 3: New apprenticeship models • Theme 4: Skills passports, one-front-door, inclusion pilots • Theme 5: Attraction-linked employment pilots 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot FA / ECL delivery models (<i>aligned to existing strategic programmes</i>) • Fast-track employability pilots for priority sectors or target cohorts • Technology led delivery models • Coordinated models linking attraction, assessment and training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pipeline Development (new models) • Employer & MA Support (new mechanisms) • Upskilling & Transition (new routes and models)
3. ACCELERATE <i>(Challenge-led scale-up)</i>	Scaling delivery where demand and models are proven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme 1: Sector responses to critical jobs • Theme 2: Urgent industry skills responses • Theme 3: Scaled MA model delivery • Theme 4: Sector skills academies • Theme 5: Training linked attraction models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sector-based academies aligned to priority industries or major projects • Rapid delivery programmes designed around employer-defined job roles • Scaled delivery of successful stream 2 projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All where new models are being scaled, or employer led-challenges have been surfaced

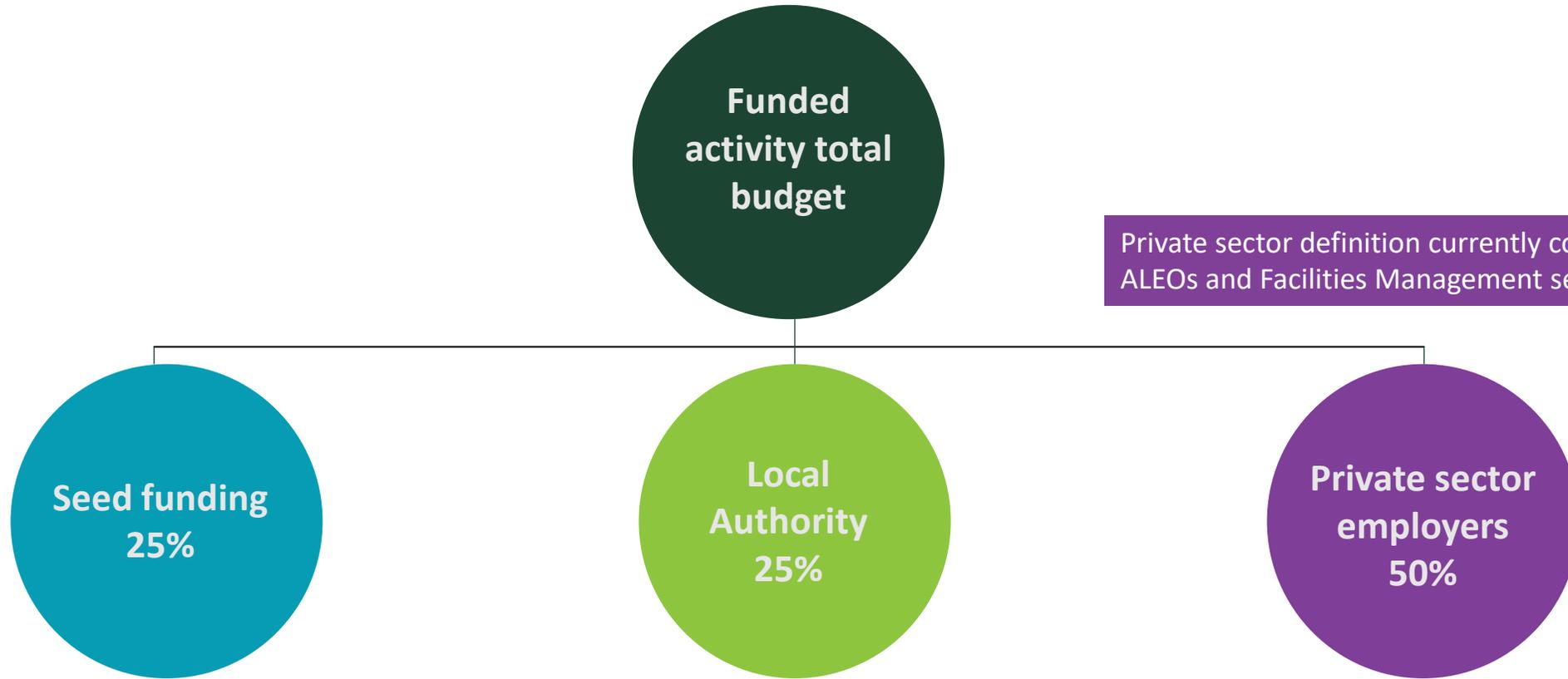
Stream 1 Eligibility | Business-led, Impact driven

Stream	Eligible Applicants	Available funding (TBD)	Co-Investment Requirements	Training and Activity Scope
<p>1. Workforce Growth</p> <p><i>Stream 1 supports employer-led activity against known workforce demand through:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>training</i> <i>pipeline activity</i> <i>apprenticeship recruitment</i> <p><i>where delivery is ready to start and employer co-investment is in place.</i></p>	<p>Local SMEs (≤249 FTE) and supply chain partners of larger Tier 1 employers.</p> <p>And/or</p> <p>Employers of any size where activity supports unemployed individuals or employer-linked pipeline delivery</p>	<p>Training / upskilling: £2,000 per eligible individual(£500 uplift where the individual is unemployed)</p> <p>Organisation cap: up to £20,000 per organisation(£25,000 for SMEs and £40,000 for large employers supporting unemployed individuals)</p>	<p>Minimum 50:50 cash co-investment from employers (no in-kind)</p> <p>Evidence of payment required at claim stage</p> <p>Simple self declaration for subsidy control (MFA).</p> <p>Payments made directly to employers</p>	<p>Accredited or industry-recognised training</p> <p>Short technical or productivity training linked to live or forecast vacancies</p> <p>Trade and compliance certification</p> <p>New MA recruitment only (bona fide new starts)</p>
	<p>SMEs (≤60 FTE)</p> <p>Subsidy payable to employers exceeding 5% apprenticeship representation, up to a maximum 10% of FTE *</p> <p>Micro-business “Kickstart” for <5fte</p> <p>Adopt an apprentice (any size of employer)</p>	<p>£5,000 per new apprentice recruited above base commitment*</p> <p>Micro-business “Kickstart” £5,000 for first apprentice (<5 FTE)</p> <p>£5,000** per adopted apprentice (into a similar job role)</p>	<p>Co-investment reflected through job creation (employee wages)</p> <p>Proof of employment and MA enrolment</p> <p>Minimum completion / retention</p> <p>Payments made directly to employers</p>	<p>Existing apprentices eligible only where redeployment is required (incl. LA back-stop employer)</p>

Stream 2 Eligibility | Business-led, Impact driven

Stream	Eligible Applicants	Available funding (TBD)	Co-Investment Requirements	Training and Activity Scope
<p>2. Workforce Innovation (Exploration focus)</p> <p>and</p> <p>3. Workforce Accelerator (Execution Focus)</p>	<p>SME's and Larger employers, sector partnerships, and consortia involving multiple businesses and providers</p> <p>Public, private, and education partners may collaborate under an employer-led bid.</p>	<p>£50,000 per eligible project (TBD)</p>	<p>Minimum 50:50 cash co-investment from employer or (private) consortium partners</p> <p>May include joint funding from multiple employers or anchor institutions e.g. sponsored challenge funds</p>	<p>Stream 2 (new models)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot or test new workforce delivery models where barriers or uncertainty exist • Innovative FA / ECL / apprenticeship delivery approaches • New employability, transition or access models for priority groups • Technology-enabled or blended delivery pilots <p>Stream 3 (scaling proven models)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scale-up of proven delivery models with evidenced demand and performance • Sector-based academies or rapid delivery programmes • Region-wide roll-out of successful pilot activity • Challenge-led responses to critical or urgent workforce needs

Investment | How co-funding could work



Private sector definition currently covers Council ALEOs and Facilities Management services.

Seed funding to lever investment from organisations with a strategic/regional interest in skills development & workforce retention.

Highland Council actively seeking financial contributions from Highland Social Value Charter partners, ICFGF (Skills & Innovation Fund + possible rNDR in future) and Tier 1 contractors. External grant funding opportunities will also be explored.

Innovative co-investment underpins the private-sector contribution, enabling SMEs and third-sector organisations to work directly with major investors. This approach expands local capacity through shared skills pipelines and partnership opportunities, helping to build a skilled, future-ready workforce.

My Highland Future: A Regional Skills Programme (Plan on a Page)

APPENDIX 2

The model below captures the feedback from a broad range of stakeholders at the recent Workforce North Summit. The broad agreement on these elements constitutes a call to action. Pledges will be sought from various private and public sector organisations to build the programme.

Why	How	What							
Vision for Creating Our Future Workforce	Key Systems We Will Deploy to Do So	Outputs We Will Achieve Together							
<p>The vision for the future is expressed in a number of key entitlements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All children and families learn about the opportunities and challenges of energy in the Highlands and how it is at the heart of the UK's future security All children and families learn about this in relation to the world of 2050 that they will live through All children experience work related learning about career options in Highland All families have access to information and activities to help inform them Adults who require it, have opportunities to reskill themselves to seize opportunities Highland can demonstrate a full employment model. 	<p>There is a core lifelong offering to engage the 31,000 children in schools and their parents in understanding the vision for the future green economy of the Highlands, which relates to the Regional Workforce and DYW Plan, focusing on construction, engineering and care:</p>	<p>We will enable change by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deploying partnership resources in a shared apprenticeship Gaining pledges from Highland employers to support agreed programmes and put these on our strategic map of supply side solutions Demonstrate the performance of our programme and build the confidence of future investors to relocate Align all sources of funding to the plan Building a partnership team which can demonstrate its impact (business growth, GVA, job creation) Increase the numbers of business mentors, STEM ambassadors and work experience programmes across Highland 							
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The Values Shaping our Partnership	Our Processes and Resources to Support Development	Outcomes We Will Deliver Through							
<p>Key values shape our programme:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are global in outlook and local in action – and are focused on creating a positive personal, family and economic future for people We are scientific and data intelligent in approach We are focused on ensuring Highland communities thrive We promote diverse communities, and we are inclusive – especially as we welcome a future workforce We promote green energy as part of a sustainable future – and look across disciplines to do so We provide hope for the future, where there is doubt about sustainability. 	<p>There is a single team approach across all agencies to delivering the future workforce that the region needs. All partners support and align to these processes to secure our objectives.</p>	<p>We measure success by how we enable economic transformation and create a future workforce:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growing our activity and completion rates for the Family of Apprenticeships (FA, MA, GA) Attracting talent to the area (people by sectors and skills) Retaining young people in the area Delivering key entitlements in the 'My Highland Future Programme' to (successful universal, talented & intensive programmes) Adding value to the economy (measured in GVA and average wage increases) Reducing vacancy rates for employment positions Increasing economic activity for key groups Growing the numbers of jobs to achieve our area targets. 							
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