



highlands & islands skills
(CIC)

**Site Options Appraisal
(Summary)**



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Executive Statement

The Highlands and Islands stand on the brink of a once-in-a-generation opportunity. With a transformational infrastructure pipeline ahead, Scotland, as much as the Highlands, needs a workforce equipped for the challenges of tomorrow. To meet this opportunity, Highlands and Islands Skills CIC is seeking to establish a **National Infrastructure Skills Centre**, a facility of international-standard scale and capability, designed to provide world-class training, innovation, and industry collaboration.

This report presents the findings of a structured site selection assessment undertaken to identify the location best suited to deliver the Centre's objectives. Drawing on lessons from leading global training centres own experiences, the assessment applies a weighted scoring matrix to evaluate sites against accessibility, strategic fit, planning and deliverability, site characteristics, amenities, cost, funding potential, and stakeholder support.

The analysis demonstrates that the preferred site provides the optimal combination of accessibility, capacity, and strategic alignment to deliver the Centre's vision. Beyond location, the site offers the foundations for a hub that will connect employers, learners, and industry, generating long-term economic value, raising skill levels, and strengthening Scotland's productivity and safety culture.

Choosing this site is the first tangible step in building a future-focused, resilient, and highly competent workforce for the Highlands and Islands. With this decision made, Highlands and Islands Skills CIC will take the first decisive step towards realising this new national facility and once this site is secured, Highlands and Islands Skills CIC can turn ambition into action, ensuring that Scotland not only meets its infrastructure demands, but leads the way in workforce excellence and innovation.

Callum Mackintosh
Co-founder & Director



Methodology

The site selection assessment was designed to ensure an evidence-based approach, providing confidence in the recommendation and supporting strategic decision-making for the National Infrastructure Skills Centre.

1. Identification of Potential Sites

Potential sites were identified through a combination of desk research, local knowledge, and direct engagement with landowners and public agencies, including Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Initial screening focused on basic suitability criteria, ownership, vacancy or speed of availability and general accessibility. A site search size of minimum 35ac to maximum 100ac was applied to reflect the spatial requirements of a world-class infrastructure training facility, including external practical sub-sector training zones and scope for future expansion. This initial screening ensured that only realistic and viable options progressed to detailed evaluation.

Five potential sites were subsequently shortlisted and assessed.

2. Evaluation Criteria and Scoring

Each candidate site was evaluated against ten key criteria:

- **Car Access** - Proximity to Inverness by road, critical for staff, learners, and industry partners.
- **Bus Access** - Public transport availability, supporting learners without private vehicles.
- **Walking Access** - Distance from Inverness city centre, providing additional accessibility and community integration.
- **Strategic Fit** - Alignment with the Centre's mission, ability to support phased growth, and suitability for world-class training delivery.
- **Planning and Deliverability** - Likelihood of securing planning permission and feasibility of construction.
- **Site Characteristics** - Ground conditions, size, topography, and suitability for training infrastructure, including heavy plant.
- **Location Amenities** - Local facilities, services, and surrounding environment that support learners and staff.
- **Cost/Value** - Acquisition and development costs relative to the value and potential of the site.
- **Funding/Leverage** - Compatibility with grants, incentives, and opportunities to leverage investment.
- **Stakeholder Support** - Local community and industry support for the site and Centre.

Each criteria was scored on a 1–5 scale, where 5 represents exceptional alignment with Centre requirements and 1 indicates significant limitations.



3. Weighting

To reflect the relative importance of each criterion, scores were weighted as follows:

Criteria Weight

Strategic Fit	25%	Bus Access	10%
Planning and Deliverability	20%	Location Amenities	10%
Site Characteristics	15%	Walking Access	5%
Cost/Value	15%	Funding/Leverage	10%
Car Access	10%	Stakeholder Support	5%

Weightings ensure that operational and strategic priorities drive the assessment, while accessibility, cost, and supporting factors provide additional context.

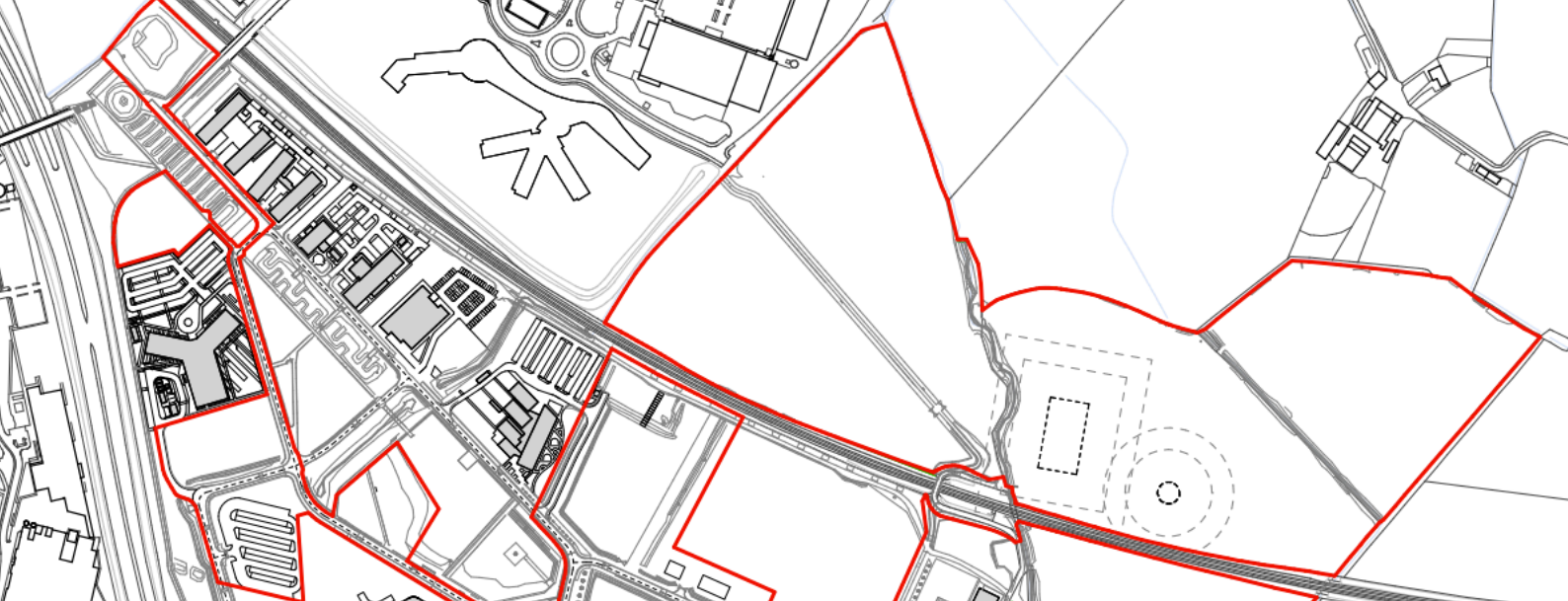
4. Scoring and Matrix

Scores were entered into a weighted matrix, producing a total score for each site. This allowed direct comparison of sites across all categories, identifying the site that best combines strategic alignment, operational feasibility, and regional impact. Detailed notes were recorded for each score to provide transparency and justification. [See page 11 for Matrix.](#)

5. Benchmarking and Evidence

The methodology was informed by international best practice, drawing on global case studies of leading infrastructure and skills centres. Lessons from these facilities guided the design of the scoring criteria, weightings, and evaluation process, ensuring that the assessment reflects what it takes to deliver a world-class training and innovation facility.

This approach provides a robust, defensible, and transparent foundation for selecting the site that will deliver maximum benefit to learners, employers, and the Highlands and Islands economy.



Site Shortlist Overview

Five potential sites were assessed for the location of the National Infrastructure Skills Centre using a weighted options appraisal methodology. The assessment considered accessibility, strategic fit, planning and deliverability, site characteristics, cost and value, funding leverage, amenities, and stakeholder considerations. The purpose of this assessment was to identify a site capable of supporting a world-class, multi-sector training facility that delivers long-term economic value and responds to Scotland's national infrastructure skills requirements.

Ardersier Port (Haventus)

Ardersier Port sits within the Inverness & Cromarty Firth Green Freeport and was explored as a potential option due to its established industrial character and proximity to offshore energy activity. Direct engagement was undertaken with Haventus to test interest in leasing land for a large-scale training facility. Haventus confirmed that they were not willing to lease land unless the centre was solely focused on offshore wind training and rented at a very high price, likely they said to be well beyond any commercial training companies reach, as the land within the port estate is valued at a significant premium and is prioritised for offshore wind energy transition, storage and manufacturing. As a result, the site performs poorly in terms of strategic fit, cost and value, and deliverability, with no realistic pathway to secure land on viable terms within the required timeframe.

Inverness Campus Sites (HIE)

The Inverness Campus sites from HIE were initially attractive due to being an academic campus already with, recreational facilities, and Inverness city centre nearby. These sites sat outside the Inverness & Cromarty Firth Green Freeport zone so are not eligible for any freeport benefits. The adjacent development of the new prison presents potential opportunities for collaboration in re-skilling offenders for work upon release. However, detailed review identified fundamental constraints, including watercourses across the site, scheduled archaeological monuments, the Inverness to Perth rail line restricting crane and lifting operations, and formal development restrictions associated with the future East Link road as set by Transport Scotland. These constraints significantly reduce developable area, fragment the site, and prevent delivery of the large-scale, integrated training spaces required. Despite strong accessibility and amenities, the sites perform poorly on planning certainty, site characteristics, and operational suitability.



Torvean Quarry (Highland Council)

Torvean Quarry offers a rare combination of scale, accessibility, and physical suitability for infrastructure training. As a former quarry, the site benefits from strong ground conditions, sheltered topography, and materials well suited to heavy civils, plant operations, and external vocational training. The site provides direct access to the A82, with rapid connection to the A9 via the Inverness West Link, and presents a practical opportunity to extend existing public transport routes by a single stop.

Crucially, Torvean provides sufficient space to support a fully integrated campus model, including training facilities, external operational areas, and on-site accommodation, which is essential for learners travelling from across the Highlands, Scotland, and beyond. The surrounding area offers high-quality amenities such as Inverness leisure centre, Kings golf course, Inverness kartway and Bught park shinty pitches that support learner experience and staff recruitment. The site also presents opportunities for innovation and place-based learning, including potential educational synergies with Scottish Canals & the Caledonian Canal.

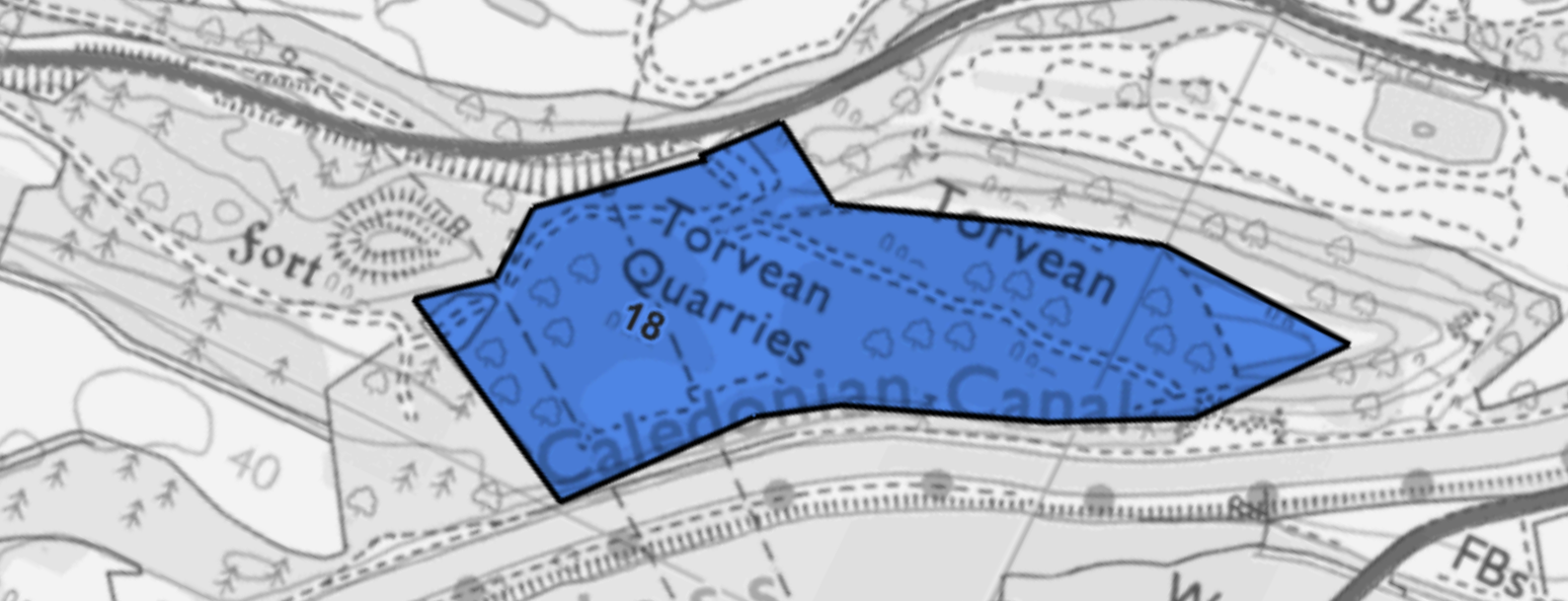
The assessment acknowledges that Torvean performs less strongly on walking accessibility due to its distance from the city centre. This was explicitly considered within the methodology and weighted accordingly. Given the national and regional catchment of the Centre, public transport and road connectivity from Inverness Railway Station and Inverness Airport were considered more representative measures of functional accessibility, and in these respects Torvean performs exceptionally well.

Longman ex-landfill (Highland Council)

The Longman site is located on restored landfill, sits within the Inverness & Cromarty Firth Green Freeport zone but is subject to significant technical and environmental constraints, including methane management requirements, resulting restrictions on excavation, and limitations on foundation design. These constraints materially restrict the installation of heavy training rigs and outdoor infrastructure central to the Centre's purpose. While the location benefits from proximity to Inverness, it performs poorly in terms of site characteristics, planning certainty, and long-term operational flexibility.

Highland Deephaven

Highland Deephaven sits within the Inverness & Cromarty Firth Green Freeport. It is a highly exposed site on a former Second World War RAF base. The site presents risks associated with UXO (unexploded ordnance) which is already a concern based on experience at NCC Bircham Newton. A high water table exists which limits excavation and civil engineering activities, and poor shelter. It is located at a considerable distance from Inverness city centre, the airport, Inverness railway station and Alness Station, resulting in poor connectivity for learners, staff, and industry partners. Limited surrounding amenities further reduce its suitability. Advice taken from Roy MacGregor founder of Global and co-founder of Nigg Skills Academy was that north of the Kessock Bridge is now the wrong location for sector skills training given the pipeline of work ahead. The site performs poorly across accessibility, strategic fit, site characteristics, and overall value.



Strategic Conclusion

The options appraisal demonstrates that Torvean Quarry provides the strongest overall solution when assessed against the full range of weighted criteria. While all sites present advantages and constraints, Torvean uniquely combines deliverability, operational suitability, accessibility, and long-term strategic value.

The proposed National Infrastructure Skills Centre is not simply a local training facility but a national skills centre addressing sector specialisms that are currently delivered outside Scotland, often in south east England - a 1000 mile round trip from Inverness. This creates avoidable cost, capacity, and resilience risks for national infrastructure programmes. The Centre therefore constitutes economic infrastructure of national importance itself, supporting workforce capability, productivity, and long-term economic value.

Alternative sites either cannot be delivered within the required timeframe, fail to meet the physical and operational requirements of a world-class facility, or do not offer the scale and flexibility needed to support a national centre. On this basis, Torvean Quarry is recommended as the preferred site to progress to the next stage of design, planning, and funding development.



Next Steps

Secure Site

Initiate discussions with the Highland Council to scope lease or purchase options, explore asset transfer and community empowerment act. This will provide the certainty required to progress design, planning, and funding activity. Early site control is critical to maintaining programme momentum and stakeholder confidence.

Advance Concept Design and Masterplanning

Commission initial concept design and masterplanning work to test layout, phasing, and operational requirements. This should include consideration of training facilities, external practical areas, accommodation, access arrangements, and future expansion, ensuring the site is developed efficiently and sustainably.

Planning Strategy and Pre-Application Engagement

Develop a clear planning strategy, including early pre-application engagement with The Highland Council and statutory consultees. This will allow key considerations such as access, landscape, environmental impacts, and integration with surrounding uses to be addressed proactively.

Transport and Accessibility Planning

Work with public transport providers and the local authority to confirm bus route extensions and service enhancements, ensuring strong public transport connectivity from Inverness city centre and key transport hubs. Active travel and access considerations will be integrated into site design where appropriate.

Funding and Business Case Development

Progress detailed business case development, aligning the preferred site with identified funding streams and investment partners. This will include refinement of capital and operational costs, phasing, and economic impact, ensuring the project remains deliverable and value-led.

Stakeholder and Industry Engagement

Continue structured engagement with employers, industry partners, and public agencies to confirm training demand, operational requirements, and opportunities for collaboration. This will ensure the Centre is designed around real workforce needs and secures early industry buy-in.

Programme Governance and Delivery Planning

Establish a clear programme governance structure, including decision-making authority, risk management, and delivery milestones. This will ensure the project transitions from appraisal to delivery in a controlled and accountable manner.

Site Locations





Matrix

Site Name	Longman Adj Landfill	Highland Deehaven	Ardersier	Inverness Campus	Torvean Quarry
Car Access Score (1-5)	5	2	5	5	5
Bus Access Score (1-5)	3	1	1	5	5
Walking Score (1- 5)	1	1	1	1	1
Strategic Fit (1-5)	1	2	1	5	5
Planning/Delivera bility (1-5)	1	5	4	3	4
Site Characteristics (1-	1	2	3	1	5
Location Amenities (1-5)	4	1	1	5	5
Cost/Value (1-5)	2	1	1	3	5
Funding/Leverage (1-5)	3	5	5	4	4
Stakeholder Support (1-5)	1	1	2	3	5
Weighted Score	2.5	2.95	3	4.55	5.75



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