



CAITHNESS CHAMBER *of* COMMERCE

2022 / 23

ANNUAL REVIEW



THE YEAR IN REVIEW • MEMBERSHIP • EVENTS
DEVELOPING THE YOUNG WORKFORCE • BUSINESS SUPPORT
LOBBYING AND POLICY • LOOKING AHEAD

FOREWORD BY THE CHAIR

STEPHEN SUTHERLAND



'IN BUSINESS WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER'

It seems to be a recurring theme over the past few years when I sit down to write my AGM foreword, reviewing a year which has been extremely challenging for our business community, as we have faced one crisis after another. Whilst we were heading for a cost-of-living crisis and high inflation last year, few probably thought interest rates would continue to rise at the rate they have over the last 12 months and there seems no end in sight.

Despite the challenging political landscape, we have never shied away from raising the issues that matter most to our business community to decision makers in Holyrood and Westminster either directly or working with our Scottish Chambers of Commerce colleagues. We challenged government over ill-thought out and burdensome regulations such as the Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) and alcohol advertising restrictions; and we have continued to champion the Wick/Aberdeen PSO, for which we fought so hard.

We have always led the charge to support our members and improve economic conditions in our community with the Chamber sitting at the heart, responding to business needs, reflecting the issues and priorities to local and national decision makers. This year has been no different with us continuing to provide practical advice and support to our members through informative events, business-to-business connections and business mentoring support.

We are continually grateful for the support of our membership as we close off another Annual Review and you can be rest assured, we will not rest on our laurels, despite the challenges we all face. We are a resilient business community and as our strapline says we are ***stronger together***.

Stephen Sutherland
Chair

A YEAR IN REVIEW BY THE CEO

TRUDY MORRIS

Last year, when reviewing the year, I talked about resilience. We had been emerging from a global Covid pandemic and I was writing against a backdrop of an economic crisis. Resilience was the word I used to describe how our members had coped in that year.

Reflecting on the past 12 months, it is clear we have experienced an extremely challenging and increasingly harsh business environment. The damaging legacy of the pandemic, coupled with the cost-of-living crisis, spiralling interest rates, material, labour and energy costs, alongside the increased cost of debt, mean many businesses are fighting to stand still amid significant and ongoing economic uncertainty.

Resilience is again the reigning theme when we look at how our members have dealt with the multitude of challenges we have encountered in this past year, a testament indeed to the extraordinary dedication, ingenuity, and resourcefulness of our business community. Of course, businesses have been through difficult times before and as a Chamber, we face these challenges head-on. We have learnt that we are stronger together and that's particularly important for a business membership and economic landscape as diverse as our own.

Centered at the heart of the North Highland business community, Caithness Chamber of Commerce is here to support businesses at all stages of their journey. Our mission continues to be to nurture a successful, sustainable and varied North Highland economy.

It has been a busy year for the Caithness Chamber, we are proud that our membership has continued to grow, and we now represent and support over 225

businesses across sizes and sectors.

In August 2022 we were delighted to welcome two new Diamond Premier Partners, West of Orkney Windfarm and Pentland Floating Offshore Wind Farm. We have been working closely with each to forge early supply chain engagement to help maximise opportunities locally and prepare for these transformational projects which will inform investment in our future skills, economy and infrastructure.

We welcomed five new members of staff to our team, some of whom you may already be acquainted with.



We were delighted to welcome Jenny Andrews, Business Admin Apprentice and Laura O’Kane, Operations and Communications Manager to the Chamber team and to strengthen the Developing the Young Workforce North Highland team new school coordinators William Little, Lorna Donaghy and Paul Kerr were appointed alongside DYW Administrator Jane Haddlesley.

We added to our exemplary fund management portfolio with the appointment of the Chamber as Fund Administrator for the Caithness and North Sutherland Fund. The CNSF was established in 2011 to distribute a £4M funding package provided by the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority. Funding is distributed to community organisations for projects that will increase the attractiveness of Caithness & North Sutherland as a place to live, work and invest. We are pleased to bring our professional knowledge and experience to the administration of the CNSF. Contracts like this help to sustain the Chamber and allow us to deliver more for the business community.

Entrepreneurship has also been at the forefront of our minds this year. For the last ten years, I have supported the Young Enterprise programme which challenges and empowers secondary school pupils

through real-life learning, to set up and manage their own company. This year we were delighted to support Thurso High School Young Enterprise Team “Social-Eyes” whose creativity and innovation secured them a spot in the UK Finals with their scavenger hunt bingo game.

Despite the challenges, it has been a rewarding year. It has been a great privilege to work alongside our members to ensure the voice of the North Highland business community is heard and I look forward to continuing to work on behalf of our members as we close off another financial year.

Trudy Morris
Chief Executive



Thurso High School, Young Enterprise “Team Social Eyes” celebrating success with their bumper awards at the Highland regional finals.

COMPANY INFO

BOARD EXECUTIVE

Chair: Stephen Sutherland (JGC Engineering & Technical Services)

Vice Chair: Louise Sinclair (Sinclair Bay Subsea)

Chief Executive: Trudy Morris

DIRECTORS

Alex MacDonald (North Point Distillery)

Andrew Mackay (The Caithness Collection)

Debbie Miller (UHI North, West and Hebrides)

Ian Neale (Myconsultant.biz)

Iain Taylor (Imenco)

Jennifer Simpson (BBM Solicitors)

Dr Keith Nicholson (Cyber Security Scotland)

Mark Rouse (Downreay Site Restoration Ltd)

Shona Kirk (Wick Harbour)

PATRON

Rt. Hon. The Viscount Thurso

REGISTERED NUMBER: SC350926

REGISTERED OFFICE:

Naver Business Centre, Naver Road,
Thurso, KW14 7QA

MEMBERSHIP

The Chamber is at its core a membership organisation. We exist to support and connect companies, bringing together firms to build new relationships, share best practice, foster new opportunities and provide practical support to help businesses trade. We are rooted at the heart of the North Highland Community and provide our members with a robust set of benefits from HR and legal advice, to business support, events and network opportunities.

But don't take our word from it – here's what our members have to say!



Jack Farnham of West of Orkney Windfarm with CCoc CEO Trudy Morris

Jack Farnham, Development Manager, West of Orkney Windfarm

The West of Orkney Windfarm is determined to play a pivotal role in fostering growth, empowerment and prosperity for Caithness and the North Highlands. Joining the Caithness Chamber of Commerce has been a positive step for us.

We want to express our gratitude to the Chamber for their help and support throughout the past year. From the outset, the Chamber has played a pivotal role; helping us identify and connect with key stakeholders; supporting us at consultation events; raising our profile with businesses across the

North Highlands; managing our supply chain event in September, and all rounded off with a fantastic dinner – which was a great occasion to celebrate and connect with members.

The team at the Chamber are great advocates for businesses and communities across the north highlands and the team's passion, understanding and dedication is evident. As we embark on a critical year, as the project navigates through the planning process, we shall no doubt call on the Chamber and its members for support.

We want to collaborate with members to identify opportunities to invest in the local supply chain and make progress towards a new Operations and Maintenance base at Scrabster Harbour which will employ around 140 people by 2029 and for decades to come. We hope our ambition and supply chain investment initiative coupled with our current STEM programme with UHI demonstrates to young people and local business that there is a bright future here, in Caithness.

Ian Neale, CEO of MyConsultant.biz

MyConsultant.biz is now entering its second year as a member of the Chamber and its business relationship continues to grow within the member network and beyond. It is very important to say that with any business group or association, it is what you put in, that can help you get more out of the pool of resources and the benefits offered by the Chamber. The team is very knowledgeable and extremely well-connected and I have found the membership and benefits to be an asset to MyConsultant.biz.

There have been several networking events and presentations by various companies throughout the year which the Chamber has organised. I believe that even when it is not a totally related topic to your business or your management team and staff, you

can learn something very useful. Plus, it is good networking time with other members. The presentations I have attended provided insightful content and created interesting opportunities.

For example: a recent presentation on AI was excellent in content and related to businesses both big and small and it enabled me to reference some of the content to two of my clients which helped me to build my relationships and client base. MyConsultant.biz continues to see good commercial value in its membership.

Alex Macdonald, Director and Co-Founder North Point Distillery

Caithness Chamber has helped our distillery immensely since our founding in 2020. The help North Point Distillery has received ranges from accessing and implementing the QUEST HR management portal, business admin support, critical strategic planning, and fundraising. Trudy has been a key resource for advising our business since the beginning. We have seen a huge return of value from our membership in the chamber, and we would strongly recommend that members continue looking at ways to engage with the Chamber as they have been incredibly active and supportive in all of our ventures.



**North Point Distillery Co-Founders
Struan Mackie and Alex Macdonald.**



Ryan Pollard, Managing Director, RDI Renewables. Dillan MacLeod, Apprentice Plumbing and Heating Engineer.

Martin O’Kane, Director of MOK Security Solutions

Membership of Caithness Chamber has given my business valuable insight into the North Highland business landscape, including information on the scope of upcoming works and opportunities ahead. As an independent consultancy business, the events have been a great way to network and connect with fellow businesses and it’s great to be part of the local Chamber community.

The Chamber team are incredibly knowledgeable and generous with their time and support. The Chamber is active in key local issues and keeps members informed of government policy and legislation and their impacts, ensuring the voice of North Highlands is heard.

Additionally, for a small company the opportunity to access the HR & Legal services within the membership fee is invaluable and offers fantastic savings.

Ryan Pollard, Managing Director, RDI Renewables

RDI Renewables have been members of Caithness Chamber for a year now. In that time the Chamber has introduced us to many business contacts some of which we have built very successful relationships with including the use of a business consultant

They have provided us with access to a wealth of knowledge and helped us gain access to funding to help with ongoing training. The Chamber keeps us notified of local business opportunities which may result in broadening our business scope.

I would highly recommend joining to access all of the opportunities available for business.

EVENTS



Puldagon Farm Shop were recognised as Young Business of the Year 2022

Annual Dinner

On Friday 11 November 2022, 150 guests gathered for the Caithness Chamber of Commerce's Annual Dinner for the first time since 2019. After an extended break we were overjoyed to see the return of the event which holds a special place on the local business calendar, consistently drawing the region's most influential business personalities every year.

At the glittering ceremony we celebrated the region's entrepreneurial spirit with our 2022 Business of the Year Awards. Puldagon Farm Shop was recognised as Young Business of the Year and the Young Entrepreneur of the Year 2022 award, sponsored by Saffery LLP, was presented to Struan Mackie of North Point Distillery. Both businesses had shown incredible ingenuity, business acumen and ambition with their achievements.

Our evening's principal sponsor was Fibre 1 and keynote speaker for the evening was Dr. Ros Rivaz Chair of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority.

Pentland Floating Offshore Windfarm Supply Chain Event

Also in November, we hosted a business breakfast with Premier Partner Highland Wind Ltd, to explore supply chain opportunities as part of the Pentland Floating Offshore Wind Farm development. Project Director, Richard Copeland, gave valuable insight into the project and scope of works and opportunities ahead.

Focus North Conference

In February 2023 we took part in the inaugural Focus North Conference, attended by 140 representatives from key public and private-sector organisations, exploring economic opportunities in the North of Mainland Scotland. Focus North brings together a partnership of public and private sector bodies, all committed to developing a fairer, resilient, and more balanced economy in Caithness and North Sutherland.

Findings were shared from recent research looking at issues such as retaining and growing the working population, transport links, housing availability and

workforce skills. A keynote address was made by Michael Matheson, then Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport.

Business Breakfast with Highland Coast Hotels

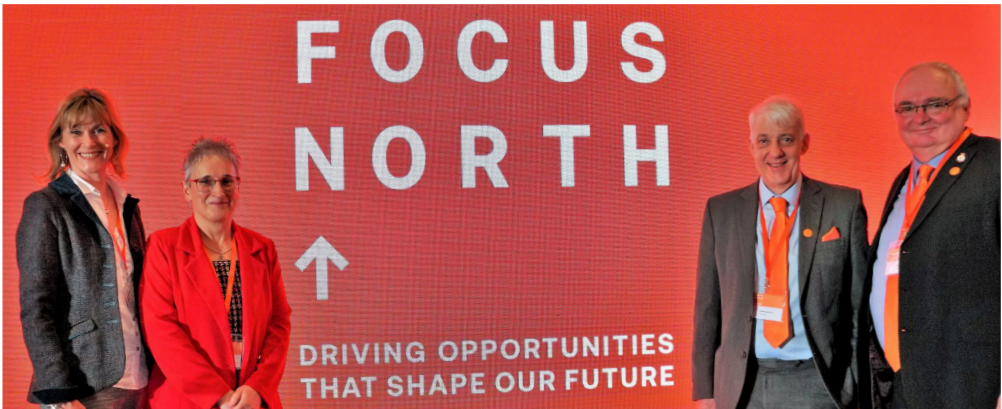
February 2023 also saw us host a business breakfast within the beautifully renovated Royal Marine Hotel in Brora. The networking event was an opportunity to gain a barometer of the area including discussion around public transport, business opportunities, recruitment, and government policy impacting the region. The event was rounded off by presentation from Developing Young Workforce North Highlands and a tour around the hotel's newly upgraded spaces, with address from Highland Coast Hotel's chairman, David Whiteford and introduction of the hotel's new management teams.

Short-Term Let Licensing Legislation Update & Q&A Session

When new legislation is on the horizon, we believe it is important to ensure our members are kept up to date on what it means for them. That's why in partnership with Venture North we welcomed Gary Sommers, Lead on short-term lets licensing for the Highland Council for an informative update and Q&A session for accommodation providers.



Struan Mackie of Northpoint Distillery was awarded Young Entrepreneur of the Year 2022



Presenter Nicky Marr, CCoC CEO Trudy Morris, Focus North Independent Chair Simon Middlemas & Programme Manager Peter Faccenda at the Focus North Conference Feb 2023

DEVELOPING THE YOUNG WORKFORCE

DYW North Highland has continued to go from strength to strength, delivering many successful activities and events during the 2022/23 academic year. From mock interviews to awareness campaigns, training opportunities to careers fairs and much more. Our team worked tirelessly in partnership with education providers and employers to inspire confidence, enable relevant employability skills and support access to the workplace for young people in the North Highland region.



Scrabster Harbour Trust, Pentland Floating Offshore Wind Farm & DYW North Highland announced sponsorship for 12 young North Highlanders to join the Tall Ships Races 2023

The DYW North Highland team provide a vital link in strengthening partnerships between businesses and education providers. There are plenty of opportunities to get involved including skills sessions, career events, work placements, workplace visits, mentoring and much more.

Here's a just snapshot of some our highlights over this year!

Mock Interviews

Over 250 pupils from Thurso, Wick and Farr High Schools took part in mock interviews organised by DYW North Highland throughout November and December. The mock interviews were supported by local industry leaders across a broad sector of workplaces and industries including law, hospitality, healthcare, engineering,

H2 Challenge

289 pupils from Wick, Thurso, Farr & Golspie High Schools took part in the Hydrogen Challenge programme, a nationally run STEM event designed to inform and inspire the next generation of

renewable energy engineers, guiding them towards careers in engineering, environmental sciences and the development of cleaner, greener transport. It challenges participants to build a hydrogen fuel cell vehicle from a kit of LEGO components, LEGO motor and custom-made miniature hydrogen fuel cell power supply. Winning S2 teams from each school went on to participate in Highland Regional Final in Inverness.

World Host Training, with Ellie Lamont

33 school pupils and 9 UHI students completed the World Host programme, designed to share the key principles at the heart of customer service in the hospitality industry. The is a one day interactive, training programme delivered by Ellie Lamont, Mackays Hotel. Pupils learnt and developed their customer service skills and gained understanding of why a high level of service is so important in the hospitality sector, recognising and building on good practice and identifying the skills needed to communicate effectively with customers and colleagues. On completion, all pupils received a world-wide recognised certificate which will benefit them in their search for employment.

Present yourself with confidence, with Nicky Marr

Preparing for interview is a key part of the employability activity which includes building confidence in our young people, who must have the ability to articulate and present themselves with confidence to ensure they leave a positive and lasting impression on potential employers. DYW North Highland in partnership with Marr Communications delivered a workshop to 23 S5 & S6 pupils in Farr High School concentrating on developing personal presentation skills. Whether it's for a job, university interview or just networking being able to present confidently is a key transferable skill.

Caithness Jobs and How to Get them Fair

After a long break, we were delighted to announce the return of Caithness Jobs and How to Get Them in person! More than just a jobs fair, the event showcased 43 local and national exhibitors offering the opportunity to learn about vacancies, apprenticeships, access to training, and much more. The event took place in UHI North Highland on a typically snowy Caithness day, but that didn't deter the 320 attendees from joining in the fun!

March 23 Sail Training Sponsorship

Ready, set sail! Scrabster Harbour Trust, Pentland Floating Offshore Wind Farm & DYW North Highland announced sponsorship for 12 young North Highlanders to join the Tall Ships Races 2023 across the North Sea, with Sail Training Shetland. This was the first time the initiative had been offered to young people in Caithness and Sutherland. The programme is designed to inspire self-confidence and teamwork, enabling participants to confront many demanding challenges, both physical and emotional.



*Top: THS Social Eyes Team with their award winning game
Middle: Iona Simpson winner of the Youth category in the Taste North Challenge sponsored by DYW North Highland
Lower: Local Industry and business leaders support mock interviews across North Highland schools*



March 23 BAE Education Roadshow

As part of British Science Week, Wick High School took part in the 18th annual BAE Systems Education Programme Roadshow. Jointly organised by BAE Systems, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force it is UK's longest-running science, technology, engineering and mathematics education roadshow. Pupils were taken on a journey from the depths of the ocean to the far reaches of outer space. Discovering how engineering will allow for exploration of uncharted areas and the science and technology needed to survive in extreme environments.

April 23 Microsoft 365 Training

DYW North Highland delivered a fully funded Microsoft 365 training course, through the UHI North Highland for young people to develop and improve employability skills focusing on key application packages including outlook, word processing and excel, teams and cloud services.

Young Enterprise Awards Success

Thurso High School Young Enterprise Team Social Eyes celebrated success with a bumper awards ceremony, seeing them crowned Company of the Year at the Young Enterprise Scotland Highland and Moray finals. The enterprising team designed

a scavenger hunt bingo game, inspired by rural family life. Alongside Business Management teacher Lucy Bremner, the team was mentored by Caithness Chamber of Commerce Chief Executive, Trudy Morris. The young team's ambition, business acumen and creativity went on to secure them a place at the National Finals, held in Glasgow.

May 23 Lego League Superpowered

In May, primary and secondary school pupils from Caithness showcased their Lego-building skills as part of a global competition. First Lego League is hosted by the Institute of Engineering and Technology, it introduces science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) to children aged four to sixteen in a fun way. The First Lego League Challenge North Highland Tournament was hosted and sponsored by Dounreay, DYW North Highland and UHI North Highland and held in the Engineering, Technology and Energy Centre (ETEC) at UHI North Highland in Thurso.

BUSINESS SUPPORT



Thomas Sinclair of Messrs Sinclair, Reaster Farm, Lyth was delighted to receive support from the Fund, which he sees as an investment into the future of farming. The Farm's apprentice Michael Doull is completing an Agriculture SQV 2 through UHI Orkney whilst working full-time on the Farm.

Business Support

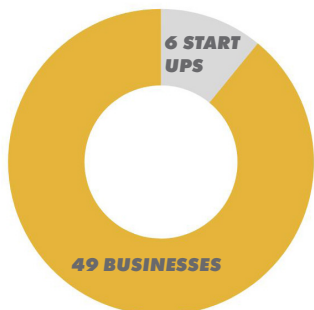
Our business support programme exists to support and nurture the next generation of businesses and entrepreneurs. With thanks to the support from Dounreay, the Chamber is able to provide bespoke business advice and guidance to support businesses launch, grow and venture into new markets.

As ever, our business support programme has provided a diverse portfolio of support over the 2022/23 period including funding applications,

developing businesses plans, sourcing funding streams, tendering, specialist advice, marketing support and much more.

This year the Caithness Business Fund celebrated 10 years by highlighting its support for apprenticeship opportunities for local businesses. Reflecting the diverse employment landscape of the region, these have included apprenticeship opportunities in agriculture, hospitality, renewables, trades, and business administration.

55 Businesses used our business support service, 6 of these were start ups.



5.5 Full-time equivalent jobs were created





LOBBYING AND POLICY

Our commitment to lobbying on behalf of our members remained a priority in 2022/23. A core activity for the Chamber, we continued to engage at all levels on important issues, providing a platform for our members to share their views and experiences directly with political decision and policy makers. We work at a local and national level to ensure the voice of the North Highland business community is part of the narrative.

The Scottish Chambers of Commerce Quarterly Economic Q1 2023 Indicator highlighted increased concern from businesses on current and future regulatory burdens and we echoed calls made to Government to address a constructive relationship with the business community.

We were active in publicising and lobbying against the regulatory burden of schemes such as the Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) and the excessive proposals to restrict the marketing of alcohol brands as well as ensuring our members were up to date on

the Short-term Let Licensing Legislation.

During the political turmoil during the year, we joined our Scottish Chambers of Commerce colleagues in calling for a reset in the relationship with government to ensure business was being listened to. We also attended the First Minister's Leaders Debate in March in Inverness to ensure the voice of the North Highlands business community was heard.

Caithness Transport Forum

Transport is a steadfast and significant topic of concern in the North Highlands. The Chamber continues to facilitate the Caithness Transport Forum with support of Dounreay and Highland Council, which brings together key stakeholders and transport operators for the economic, social and environmental benefit of businesses and residents of Caithness.

Key transport priorities continue to be investment in rural transport infrastructure, road conditions,

local bus provision, the Wick/Aberdeen PSO, rail services and the roll out of the Road Equivalent Tariff for the Northern Isles.

A meeting was held at the end of May with Scottish Rail Holdings (the new non departmental public body responsible for Scotrail) to highlight the importance of the Far North line and ensure improvements and enhancements promised were still going ahead and to lobby for better catering facilities.

Bank of England Update

In March we were once again joined by Will Dowson, Agent for the Bank of England, as part of the Bank's nationwide business barometer exercise. The event gave valuable insight into the Bank of England's forward thinking at a time of unprecedented global upheaval. Members made significant contribution to the Bank's understanding of the impact of the current uncertainties and turbulence on rural economics such as our own in the North Highlands, and the nuances in comparison to other parts of the UK.



*CCoC CEO Trudy Morris with Will Dowson,
Agent for the Bank of England*

LOOKING AHEAD

As we look ahead to 2023-24 our mission continues to be to nurture a thriving, sustainable and diverse North Highland economy. The economic turbulence of the last year has solidified our belief that we are indeed stronger together and that is particularly important for a business membership as diverse as ours across the North Highlands.

Our membership remains our priority and as a Chamber community, we will continue our commitment to face rising challenges head-on, advocating for the North Highland business community. We will continue to work alongside our members to support business development and foster opportunities for growth, with the ambition to grow and diversify a sustainable economy and increase the number of private sector businesses operating locally. The effects of continuous inflationary pressures, rising costs and a cautious labour market are key concerns we will be monitoring closely. As are the continued concerns about current and future regulatory burdens.

At the Focus North Conference in February 2023, we heard testament the North Highlands is fundamental to Scotland's transition to renewable power and that exciting opportunities are on the horizon through our region's ability to capitalise on the 'Just Transition'. Our remit within the Focus North partnership will focus on understanding skills shortages, and future employment demands and retaining and developing a skilled local workforce alongside addressing the vital transport connectivity issues, both key issues for our membership and our region's readiness to maximise new opportunities.

As ever we are here to support our members at every stage of their journey. From access to funding, through to our business support mentoring programme we offer a unique opportunity to access expert knowledge, advice and network opportunities.

This is just a short snapshot of life at the Chamber over the past year. To find out more and keep up to date with all the latest news, visit us online or contact the team using the details below.



CAITHNESS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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**THE CHAMBER IS GRATEFUL FOR THE SUPPORT OF
ITS PREMIER PARTNERS**



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