

North West Highlands 2045 A draft vision – April 2021

Why create a vision for the North West Highlands?

The NorthWest2045 project has been established by a diverse group of local organisations with a common desire to see a future where our communities thrive economically, socially, and environmentallyⁱ. We want our population to grow sustainably, job opportunities to broaden and average salaries to rise. We think this will require a resilient and diverse economic base which makes the best use of our natural assets while enhancing local skills and opportunities.

We believe creating a collective, long-term vision for the future (to 2045) will give voice to the desires and needs of the people of the North West Highlands and help us work together to make our aspirations reality. This will be critical if we are to meet some of the challenges we face (climate change, Brexit, recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and changes to rural subsidies) in a way that is beneficial to our future prospects. We have many assets to build on: resilient communities and strong community ownership and action; a world class landscape; a range of businesses contributing to the Scotland brand (food & drink, tourism); and abundant natural assets in the marine and land environment. The support of key decisionmakers and agencies in local and national government and private industry will be key, and so we are engaging with them, ready to present our vision to the new Scottish Parliament in the summer. The next few weeks will see us engaging as widely as possible with residents from across all the communities of the North West Highlandsⁱⁱ to create that vision and a set of ideas for action.

We invite you to get involved.

A draft vision

Over the past few months, we have talked to local community groups and other key stakeholders and looked at the results from numerous previous consultations and plans. Building on this, we have created an initial draft vision which we are now testing in interviews, surveys and a small number of workshops. It is key that the content of the vision alongside any activity is created, owned and led by our local communities, so we want to hear your thoughts to help us further develop this draft into a strong vision and statement of shared ambition for the future.



Figure 1: Scourie Sports Pavillion

KEY BUILDING BLOCKS: what needs to be in place now?

- **Bring more land into use, for housing and crofting** – and ensure that more high-quality affordable housing is built across the entire area, as part of the existing settlement pattern
- **Effective broadband** – working with providers to ensure the best possible coverage, speed of connection and ability to take advantage of developing technologies
- **Improved access and roads** – an urgent upgrade to our roads and facilities such as car parks, WC provision, and recreation facilities for the benefit of local residents and visitors

WHAT ARE OUR ASPIRATIONS? A vision for how the North West Highlands might look in 2045

- **“More young people and families come to stay and work”**

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated moves to remote working, increasing the desire among many young people to come for a better quality of life in a beautiful environment. R100 rollout and Starlink has significantly improved communications and rising population numbers mean community services thrive.

- **“Sustainable, skilled and varied livelihoods”**

Significant investment in new and existing industries has increased local jobs and helped to bring new skills and professions to our communities with better, more reliable employment and higher pay.

- **“Visitors care for our place”**

Community owned and operated tourism management across the area has ended the reliance on seasonality and focussed on sustainable, slow and experience-based tourism. Visitors stay longer and visit more often creating a stronger connection with both the land and our communities providing greater income stability for those working in tourism.

- **“Our environment is protected and productive”**

Subsidies and investments have promoted carbon capture and more environmentally sustainable practices in fishing, crofting and land management are helping keep our natural assets in better health, providing world-class education and research opportunities while also providing livelihoods for local people.

HOW DO WE GET THERE? The opportunities for development

1. Strong community leadership and local democracy

Greater community participation in decision making on investments, developments and planning; increased inter-village collaboration, strategic coordination and peer support

In practice? Rural co-working and community Hubs investments; changes to Planning legislation emphasising participation; participatory budgeting; place-based policy

2. Improving access to land for housing and crofting

Emphasis on access for working age residents; sustainable land use practice to ensure natural assets are safeguarded, productive and sustain local livelihoods.

In practice? National Infrastructure Mission and Rural Housing Fund; Planning Framework emphasis on repopulation of remote areas and provision of housing; crofting grants for new entrants and new crofting practice (e.g. Woodland Croft grants); changes to rural subsidies

3. New technologies and infrastructure to enhance rural living

Better digital connections, drones and sustainable transport options mean residents can get what they need, including services, closer to where they live.

In practice? Roll out of Broadband; new data centres for digital connectivity; Electric Vehicle charging point roll out and hydrogen fuels

4. A diversified economy with a skilled workforce

Local economy grows and evolves existing key industries (fishing, crofting etc.) alongside attracting new industry and skills and the rise in remote working to create a more resilient economy.

In practice? UK Shared Prosperity Fund; Sutherland Spaceport; UNESCO status of local sites attracting research; Keodale Stock Club development; Countryside Learning Scot jobs/skills for young people project

5. A shared vision for tourism

Coordinated strategic vision and response by community, public sector, NGOs, and tourism business network in the area capitalises on the growing interest in sustainable & slow tourism for the highest possible positive local economic and environmental impact.

In practice? NWH Geopark working group develops heritage/science tourism objectives. UNESCO National Trail, Sutherland Community Partnership Sustainable Tourism Sub-Group; Scourie Rocks Visitor centre; NHI/UHI sustainable tourism strategy; North by North West; NC500; Tourism Levy and other funding available.

6. Investment in a sustainable economy and nature-based jobs

Climate Act shifting emphasis on all areas of rural development policy towards sustainable and green industry and jobs; carbon capture opportunities in peatland and forestry, and new agricultural practice, local food production with investment and subsidies aligning.

In practice? Green Jobs Fund; Regional Land Use pilot; community renewables; offshore wind developments; CAP subsidy changes; Just Transition Commission

What's next?

Over the next few weeks local young people will be interviewing residents and other key folk across the whole of the North West Highlands using surveys and in-depth interviews to gather views and ideas. Three workshops will be held in early June (each focused on one locality in the area; Coigach/Assynt; Scourie/Kinlochbervie; and Durness, Tongue and Bettyhill) where we'll share the findings and shape the next iteration of the Vision, ready to publish in the summer and present to Scottish Government.



Figure 2: Assynt landscape

We hope to get as many people actively engaged as possible in this time to ensure the work is truly community-led. This is only the start of the process – there'll be many more conversations to have and detail to develop in the months and years to come. Our aspiration is for a wide range of local residents to own and develop this work, creating a platform for community action for the long-term and we'll be actively seeking views on how you would like to do this.

Please do take part and share invites with your friends, neighbours and colleagues to help us create a different future for the place we love.

ⁱ We have representatives from; Assynt Development Trust, Assynt Foundation, Highland Council, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, John Muir Trust, North Highland Initiative, North West Highlands Geopark, Reay Forest Estate, Scottish Land Commission, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Scourie Community Development Company, Up North Development Trust, and Wildland Ltd.

ⁱⁱ Our geographic focus runs from Coigach and Assynt in the South, north to Durness and east to Bettyhill and the River Naver.