



CAITHNESS CHAMBER *of* COMMERCE

2023 / 24

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'*

As I write and review our previous financial year, I do it against the backdrop of having just celebrated 50 years since the first chamber of commerce was established in Caithness.

At the 50th Annual Dinner, I reflected on how far the Chamber has come since 1974 and indeed since the 'new' chamber was established some sixteen years ago. With a staff of eleven, it has become the foremost business organisation in the North Highlands, punching above its weight and delivering value for members, community and the region as a whole.

Growth, investment and innovation are pivotal to our region's future, yet many businesses are still struggling with rising costs, labour and skills shortages, and regulatory burdens. On both a local level and as part of the wider national Scottish Chambers Network, we have been instrumental in holding governments and policymakers to account on economic and business policy, and ensuring the voice of the North Highlands is part of the national narrative.

This work never stops, and we will continue to hold key decision-makers in Inverness, Holyrood and the newly elected UK Parliament to account and ensure our priorities are at the top of the agenda.

This year's annual review highlights the outstanding achievements and dedication of the team at Caithness Chamber. We continue to provide practical advice and support to our members through informative events, business-to-business connections and business mentoring support.

As we close off another Annual Review, we are continually grateful for the support of our membership. Year after year we raise the bar, and through close collaboration, and the support of our members, partners and stakeholders, we will build a more resilient, entrepreneurial, prosperous and sustainable economy for the future.

**Stephen Sutherland**  
**Chair**

# A YEAR IN REVIEW BY THE CEO

TRUDY MORRIS



to support businesses at every stage of their journey. Our mission remains focused on nurturing a successful, sustainable, and diverse North Highland region.

The Chamber has had a successful year, welcoming new members and actively engaging with them through a variety of events. We launched a new series of Speed Networking events, offering invaluable opportunities for members to establish connections and raise their business profiles. We've been overwhelmed by the enthusiasm and support shown for our new Members' Insight initiative, where members have generously shared their knowledge and expertise with their peers.

We were also pleased to welcome seven new team members this year, many of whom may already be familiar to you. Among them is Alison Middlemas,

In recent years, I have often discussed the resilience of businesses as they navigate turbulent and challenging economic times. The cost-of-living crisis and rising business costs continue to present difficulties. In July we witnessed a change of leadership at Number 10, and now as a nation, we likely face tax increases. In addition, we confront fiscal challenges from the Scottish Government and await their December budget with some concern.

However, our businesses have grown accustomed to tough conditions, which seem to have become the norm rather than the exception. As a Chamber, we face these challenges head-on, having learned that we are **Stronger Together**, a strap-line that typifies a business membership and economic landscape as diverse as ours.

Situated at the heart of the North Highland business community, Caithness Chamber of Commerce is here



who joined the Chamber as Senior Administrator working on our fund management contracts.

Access to skilled labour and talent attraction are still primary concerns across all business sectors. In a proactive effort to fortify and advance our region's future, we welcomed Lindsay Matthews as our Talent Attraction Specialist for our Recruit North Highlands initiative, funded by NRS Dounreay. Lindsay is spearheading this initiative in close collaboration with the Focus North partnership. Working closely with businesses in our region to identify skills gaps and talent needs, Recruit North Highlands will seek to elevate the North Highlands as a destination of choice to live, work, study and invest. Lindsay will offer tailored support and guidance to prospective candidates contemplating a move to the region.

To further strengthen the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) North Highland team, we appointed new School Coordinators: Alice Nicolson, Nicola Swanson, and Stacie MacDonald, alongside DYW Operations Manager, Tom McGee.

Focusing on the future generation, we have made significant progress with apprenticeships. This year, we've seen a notable increase in applications for apprenticeship grants from the Caithness Business Fund. This demonstrates growing confidence among local businesses and highlights the power of collaboration in overcoming challenges and creating opportunities.

We are thrilled that the Caithness Business Fund is playing a vital role in nurturing young talent in the North Highlands through both the *FutureSkills* and Caithness Business Fund Apprenticeship Grant Schemes.

Caithness Chamber is a testament to the unwavering dedication and collective efforts of our members, staff, and supporters. We remain committed to fostering a dynamic and resilient business environment. By continuing to support one another and advocating for the unique strengths of our region, we can ensure the North Highlands thrives for generations to come. This has been a rewarding year and once again it has been a great privilege to work with our members.

**Trudy Morris, Chief Executive**







# 28

## Business Events

Networking, Supply Chain Workshops, Learning and Sectoral Information. Delivered online and in person.



# 480<sup>+</sup>



## Event Attendance

# 48



## Media Releases & Expert Comments

Plus Features in 5 Issues of Executive Magazine with Over 41 Pages of Content Promoting our Members.



# 11k<sup>+</sup>



## Audience on Social Media

Over 3.8k Social Media posts. Creating a Reach of 80.7k Users with 129.2k Impressions

## COMPANY INFO

### BOARD EXECUTIVE

Chair: Stephen Sutherland (JGC Engineering & Technical Services)  
Vice Chair: Louise Sinclair (Sinclair Bay Subsea)  
Chief Executive: Trudy Morris

### DIRECTORS

Shona Kirk (Wick Harbour)  
Alex MacDonald (North Point Distillery)  
Andrew Mackay (The Caithness Collection)  
Debbie Miller (UHI North, West and Hebrides)  
Ian Neale (Myconsultant.biz)  
Dr Keith Nicholson (Cyber Security Scotland)  
Iain Taylor (BOWL)  
Jennifer Simpson (BBM Solicitors)

### PATRON

The 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 for it – here's what our members have to say!*



## **Lisa O'Brien, O'Brien Recycling**

"We had a large tender we wanted to submit. The Chamber put us in contact with a consultant to help us. The knowledge and support we received were beyond what we expected. The tender was submitted, and this would not have been possible without the extensive help we received. From recruitment advice to business support, the communication and help we have received from the Chamber has been invaluable to our small business."

## **Sacha Wright, Director, The Strategy Collective**

"The Chamber is an excellent way to connect with other businesses. We have established numerous connections through their speed networking events and online chats. It's also great to witness the impact of a collective voice at both local and national levels. The Chamber fills an important gap in the local business community."





**Allan Tait, Community Engagement Manager, Thistle Wind Partners**

"Thistle Wind Partners are both a new company and new to Caithness as it was only in January 2022 that Crown Estate Scotland awarded TWP two of the ScotWind leasing sites for Offshore Wind Development with of course one of them being the Ayre Offshore Wind Farm project. Caithness Chamber of Commerce has been vital in enabling us to make contacts and establish ourselves in the county.

The Chamber has supported us when organising community and supply chain events, and we have been able to interact with other members by attending a variety of Chamber activities including speed networking and the annual dinner.

It is fair to say that support from the Chamber has been vital in the development of both our company and the project and I am sure that partnership will go from strength to strength."

**Rebecca Wymer, Founder, No Nonsense Nutrition**

"The Chamber supported me over the last 8 years in my first business, and recently has been incredibly supportive with helping me get my second business and new career off the ground. The team is always really quick to reply, very honest, and helpful in their responses. Knowing that the Chamber is there if I need them for advice or help is a huge relief for any business owner, no matter how big the business may be. For anyone who is hesitating about joining - do it! It's worth every penny!"



# EVENTS

*At Caithness Chamber, our strapline, “Stronger Together,” is not just words; it is an ethos reflected in the actions of our team, Board and members who consistently demonstrate the value of community by sharing their time, knowledge, and expertise.*



*Mandy Boydell, YCC Chocolatier, Winner of the Young Business Award in the Micro category, 2024, sponsored by West of Orkney Windfarm.*

In the summer of 2023, we were delighted to host a breakfast event featuring Katrine Pearson, Director of 3x1 Group, where we explored how AI can enhance marketing and communications efforts.

In November, in partnership with Venture North, we welcomed Richard Dunbar, MD of Park Lodge International Ltd, to provide an expert overview on the safety concerns associated with Lithium-ion battery charging. His session offered invaluable advice on safeguarding businesses against the associated risks. Also in November, we hosted a drop-in information session for businesses and community organisations. Attendees were able to learn more about the Chamber's work, the business and community funds

we manage, our business support programme, and the Developing Young Workforce North Highland (DYW) initiative.

In early Spring, we launched our new “Members Insight” series, a virtual platform where Chamber members share their expertise with fellow members. All full members’ insights series have been recorded and are available to view online at your convenience. Contact the Chamber team for access. Below are some more highlights from our year!

## **Supply Chain Event with West of Orkney Windfarm**

In September 2023, we were delighted to work with



our premier partner, West of Orkney Windfarm, on a supply chain event at the Pentland Hotel in Thurso. This early engagement provided a great opportunity for our local supply chain to prepare for upcoming work. In addition to the developments for the operations and maintenance base at Scrabster, this project is expected to create significant opportunities for local companies during both the commissioning and service of the onshore support network. Our Chamber Online Supply Chain Directories include a wide range of businesses, from engineering, construction, and fabrication to consultancy and accommodation providers. These directories showcase the capabilities of the local supply chain and the services available in the region.

### **Annual Dinner and Business Awards 2023**

In September 2023, the Chamber held its highly anticipated 49th Annual Dinner and Awards Ceremony at the Norseman Hotel in Wick. The event featured an inspiring keynote address by Dr Liz Cameron CBE, Director and Chief Executive of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce. Dr Cameron praised the invaluable contributions of Caithness Chamber and its members, highlighting their significant role in amplifying Scotland's business voice both nationally and internationally.

We were thrilled to present the Young Business Award in the Micro category, sponsored by West of Orkney Windfarm, to CC Chocolatier, founded in 2019 by Mandy Boydell. Equally, it was fantastic to see North Point Distillery, established in 2020 by business partners Struan Mackie and Alex MacDonald, awarded the Young Business Award in the SME category, sponsored by Pentland Floating Offshore Wind. Based at Forss Business and Energy Park, the distillery has impressively quadrupled its production since its inception in 2020.

### **Tendering Excellence with PA Consulting**

With support from NRS Dounreay, PA Consulting held two informative and interactive virtual expert panel discussions on tendering to win business.

PA's expert shared their significant experience helping clients with tendering and winning bids in these sessions designed to help SME / VSCE businesses with this, bringing insight into key requirements,

optimised approaches and common pitfalls as well as sharing best practices.

### **Business Breakfast with Thistle Wind Partners**

We were warmly welcomed at Mackays Hotel on a particularly frosty morning in December when we hosted a Business Breakfast with Thistle Wind Partners (TWP). The event provided businesses with the opportunity to make valuable connections and learn about the supply chain capabilities in the Highlands & Islands region.

### **Speed Networking**

Our first in-person networking event of 2024 kicked off in style with a Speed Networking event at the newly renovated Thurso Royal Hotel. The fast-paced event provided members with an opportunity to foster valuable professional connections, reconnect with fellow businesses in a laid-back setting, and discover new opportunities for growth. Our networking events were created in response to demand from our members and we are delighted to see valuable connections strengthening our business community in the North Highlands.



# DEVELOPING THE YOUNG WORKFORCE

*DYW North Highland has continued to make a significant impact, delivering numerous successful activities and events throughout the 2023/24 academic year. This includes mock interviews, awareness campaigns, training opportunities, and careers fairs. Our team works tirelessly with education providers and employers to inspire confidence, develop employability skills, and support young people's access to the workplace in the North Highland region.*



## **From Sheriff Court to Outer Space!**

Whether in the classroom or the workplace, the DYW North Highland team has been working hard to ensure young people across the North Highlands have access to opportunities that help them grow, make informed choices about their futures, and prepare for the working world. Over the past year, the team has delivered more than **400 events and activities** for young people from primary school through to S6. We've also been working closely

with local businesses and organisations to create a strong narrative of opportunity for young people in our region. A special thank you goes out to the business leaders and industry experts who have acted as role models, showing young people that anything is possible.

We've been lucky to organise some fantastic out-of-classroom experiences, including a day at Wick Sheriff Court exploring both sides of the docks, a

behind-the-scenes tour of Merlin Cinema, and pizza-making at Burghfield House in Dornoch within UHI's professional cookery classroom – just to mention a few!

Back in the classroom, activities have been just as busy. We launched our first-ever Creative Careers Fair at Thurso High School, designed to spark interest in the creative industries. We also introduced our "Life Hack Lunches," where employers and mentors gave up their lunch breaks to share insights into career pathways, from healthcare and social care to construction and beyond. We held sessions on apprenticeships, where current apprentices shared their experiences and hosted a visit from Airbus Defence, opening young minds to the exciting possibilities of careers in space - encouraging them to shoot for the stars with their future careers!

DYW North Highland plays a crucial role in strengthening partnerships between businesses and education providers. There are numerous opportunities to get involved, such as skills sessions, career events, work placements, workplace visits, and mentoring. Here are some highlights from our year:

### **Businesses Support Mock Interviews**

Throughout the autumn, over 350 pupils from Thurso, Golspie, Dornoch, Wick, Farr, and Kinlochbervie High Schools took part in mock interviews organised by DYW North Highland. These interviews were generously supported by local industry leaders across a broad range of sectors, including law, hospitality, health and social care, engineering, and creative industries. Students honed their interview skills and gained first-hand experience, helping to prepare them for future career opportunities and real-world professional environments.

### **Caithness Jobs and How to Get Them Returns!**

The largest and most comprehensive job, career, training, and recruitment event in Caithness made a highly successful return in February 2024. Hosted at the East Caithness Community Facility, the event attracted more than 35 exhibitors and offered attendees invaluable insights into current job opportunities, essential skills for future careers, and available training and apprenticeship programmes. With over 320 attendees, the event featured

interactive exhibitions, a live vacancies board, and a CV clinic where employers provided expert advice and guidance.

### **Building our Team!**

In February, we were thrilled to celebrate the achievements of our Business Administration Apprentice, Jenny Andrews, who successfully completed her Level 3 Business and Administration qualification with UHI North, West and Hebrides. Jenny has since transitioned into her new role as a Business Administrator with the Chamber and DYW North Highland. This is a fantastic milestone for Jenny, who is already a highly valued member of our team.

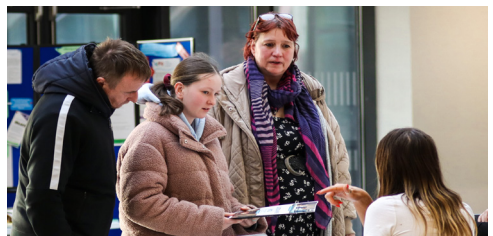
In March, DYW North Highland was also pleased to welcome our new Operations Manager, Tom McGee. With a strong background in coaching, mentoring, and management, Tom is working closely with our School Coordinators, Alice Nicolson, Nicola Swanson, and Stacie MacDonald, to support the six high schools in our region.

### **Could you make a difference?**

By working closely with everyone involved in careers and employment, DYW North Highland guarantees that young people receive support, advice, and valuable connections with employers and real-world experiences. If you're a business looking to make a positive impact by assisting our youth in preparing for the world of work, we'd love to hear from you!



## **ACTIVITIES & EVENTS**





# BUSINESS SUPPORT



Chamber CEO Trudy Morris with Stuart McAuley, Project Director, West of Orkney Windfarm

The Chamber continues to manage a portfolio of funds – two business funds (the Caithness Business Fund and the North Highland Regeneration Fund) and two community benefit funds (the Baillie Wind Farm Community Benefit Fund and the Caithness and North Sutherland Fund). These types of contracts not only help to sustain the Chamber, but they also allow us to deliver more for the business community and provide a holistic approach to business support.

The Caithness Business Fund has supported businesses to recruit apprentices for several years. Feedback from the Chamber membership along with an uptick in apprenticeship recruitment in 2023, demonstrated an increased need and willingness amongst the business community to invest and train a new generation.

In February, the Caithness Business Fund received a significant investment boost of £100,000 from Focus North partners NRS Dounreay and the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority to support the launch of *FutureSkills*, an apprenticeship grant scheme aimed at addressing skills shortages and promoting investment in new opportunities for businesses and young people in the North Highlands. This was soon followed by investment of £50,000 from the West of Orkney Windfarm.

Throughout the 2023/24 year, the Caithness Business Fund provided support for thirteen businesses with grants towards the employment of an apprentice within their team, with three of these awarded through the new *FutureSkills* initiative.







Our business support programme is designed to nurture and assist the next generation of businesses and entrepreneurs. Thanks to the support from NRS Downreay, the Chamber can offer tailored business advice and guidance to help businesses launch, grow, and expand into new markets.

Throughout the 2023/24 period, our business support programme has provided a wide range of assistance, including help with funding applications, business plan development, identifying funding sources, tendering, specialised advice, marketing support, and more.

### **Café Groats**

Our Business Support Programme assisted Café Groats in trialling a new Oil Fryer Filtration System. This initiative not only enhanced environmental sustainability but also improved the workplace environment. The trial led to a 61% reduction in cooking oil costs, resulting in an average weekly saving of £146 for the business.

*“The support offered through the study has been excellent. The initiative allowed us to take a risk on the purchase of the equipment, and I wouldn’t have expected the savings to be so huge. The impact of the machine has not only helped to reduce costs and tackle food waste, but it has a great impact on the kitchen team.”*

**Andrew Mowat, Director,  
John o’Groats Leisure Ltd**

### **Andy Music UK**

Andy Williamson sought assistance in accessing funding for his business venture, and we were eager

to lend our support. We collaborated closely with Andy, guiding him through the process of assembling a comprehensive business plan tailored to his objectives. With our guidance, Andy was well-prepared to pursue funding opportunities. Ultimately, we facilitated his application to the Caithness Business Fund, providing him with the tools and resources necessary to present his venture in the best possible light.

*“To have access to this level of support whilst running a business in a somewhat isolated community is a terrific asset and something Caithness should be very proud of.”*

**Andy Williamson, Andy Music UK**



# LOBBYING AND POLICY

*Our commitment to lobbying on behalf of our members remained a key priority throughout 2023/24. As a core activity of the Chamber, we continued to engage at all levels on critical issues, providing a platform for our members to express their views and experiences directly to political decision-makers and policymakers. We work both locally and nationally to ensure that the voice of the North Highland business community is included as part of the wider narrative.*



Lobbying and policy work during the reported financial year has included:

- Joining a Panel of industry experts at the Highlands & Islands Green Energy Conference
- Attending a Nuclear Institute Association (NIA) Holyrood Reception with MSPs, Civil Servants and Industry Representatives
- Meeting with Fiona Hyslop, Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Transport to discuss the region's significant challenges and opportunities, in particular lobbying for continuation of PSO funding for the Wick – Aberdeen air route and emphasising the region's critical dependence on the A9 north of Inverness
- Attending the Highland Council's Sustainable Tourism Strategy Workshop to advocate and raise the concerns of our members
- Facilitating a round-table for members with the Agent for the Bank of England
- Working with Scottish Chambers of Commerce

(SCC) in lobbying UK & Scottish Governments:

- » Calling for a reduction in VAT for the hospitality and tourism industries
- » Advocating for a flexible immigration system and reform of the Occupation List to allow businesses to attract an international workforce
- » Raising concerns around transparency of energy standing charge costs imposed on businesses
- » Contributing to SCC's Rally for Growth manifesto for the UK General Election
- » Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill – call for views

### **Caithness Transport Forum (CTF)**

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 NRS Downreay and the Highland Council, which brings together key stakeholders and transport operators for the economic, social and environmental benefit of businesses and residents of Caithness.

With this support, the Chamber has been advocating for improved transport infrastructure in the region for over a decade and a half. Transport connectivity is recognised as a crucial factor in tackling depopulation and ensuring the sustainability of the North Highland region.

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.

In November 2023, we facilitated a meeting between Far North Community Rail and Scottish Rail Holdings. The Chamber has also led extensive lobbying efforts to safeguard vital air services, particularly in response to concerns about uncertain Scottish Government funding.

At the 49th Caithness Chamber of Commerce Annual Dinner, we were honoured to welcome our keynote speaker, Dr Liz Cameron CBE, Chief Executive of Scottish Chambers of Commerce. In her address to Chamber members and the North Highland business

community, she called for at least 10 years of support to develop and strengthen the vital connectivity needed from Wick John o' Groats Airport.

Following announcements of further delays to the dualling of the A9 from Perth to Inverness, we called for urgent action. The A9, an increasingly busy and dangerous lifeline route, connects rural communities to essential markets and opportunities. With 10 of the 11 most hazardous single-carriageway sections of the A9 located north of Inverness, we remain committed to ensuring that these concerns are not overlooked.

In April, on behalf of the CTF feedback was submitted to the Islands Connectivity Plan which sets out the Scottish Government's long-term objectives and policies for ensuring necessary and sustainable transport links for our islands. Trudy also joined the consultation in Stromness to ensure the Caithness side of the Pentland Firth is considered in this process.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

We are now halfway through our 2024/25 financial year, and it has been a busy six months. In June we presented our own 'Rally for Growth' manifesto to the UK Election candidates along with a Hustings event for members to quiz the would-be MPs, and just a few weeks ago we celebrated our 50th Annual Dinner in style.

Government fiscal challenges and how these will impact businesses are a key concern and the forthcoming UK Autumn and Scottish Government Budgets will no doubt call for increased advocacy for the North Highlands.

We are already in discussion with the Highland Council with regards the proposed Visitor Levy which they plan to roll-out across the Highlands in 2026 and will encourage members and the wider community to respond to the forthcoming consultation.

Our membership remains our priority and 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 networking 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**

