

ENABLING OUR NEXT GENERATION

Young People and the Highlands and Islands:
Maximising Opportunities

Executive Summary: November 2018





INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a major research study focused on the changing attitudes and aspirations of young people aged between 15 and 30 in relation to living in the Highlands and Islands.

In total 3,130 young people participated in the research, sharing their views on living, working and studying in the region.

The study, undertaken by ekosgen, involved large-scale engagement with young people as well as extensive desk research and consultations with key stakeholders. It builds on similar research undertaken by ekosgen for HIE in 2015 – Young People and the Highlands and Islands: Attitudes and Aspirations¹.

The population of young people living in the Highlands and Islands is a key issue for economic growth. Net out-migration of young people pursuing education or employment opportunities remains a significant challenge.

Talent attraction, retention and return is currently a key focus of policy and is a core part of ongoing efforts to rebalance the region's population. Central to this is maximising the opportunities for young people to stay in, return or move to the Highlands and Islands to live, work and study.

STUDY AIMS AND APPROACH

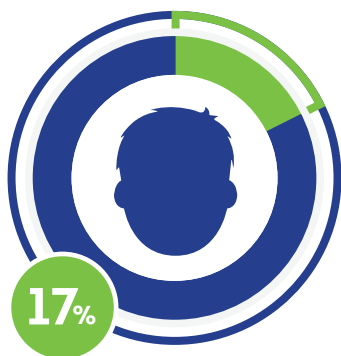
The study has two principal aims: to provide an overview of the evolving attitudes and aspirations of young people in the Highlands and Islands, and how these have changed since 2015; and to identify gaps within the current provision of education, training and employment, and consider how opportunities can be maximised for all young people.

The primary research for the study consisted of an in-depth survey of young people both within and outwith the Highlands and Islands, coupled with a programme of online focus groups. These were supported by an extensive social media engagement campaign to foster interest and engagement in the research. A broad programme of consultation with stakeholders from public and private sector organisations was undertaken to explore the perspectives of employers, policy-makers and key groups in relation to the study.

1. www.hie.co.uk/young-people-research

CONTEXT

There is a deficit of young people in the region: those aged 15-30 comprise



of the population, compared to 21% across Scotland as a whole.



Outward migration of young people from the region is particularly concentrated within the 15-19 age group.

The population of the Highlands and Islands was approximately 470,000 in 2016. However, there is a deficit of young people in the region: those aged 15-30 comprise 17% of the population, compared to 21% across Scotland as a whole. This deficit is most acute in the Outer Hebrides, Lochaber, Skye and Wester Ross and Argyll and the Islands. Whilst the Highlands and Islands population is projected to remain largely stable to 2041, the number of 15-30 year olds is expected to decrease substantially, by 15%.

Much of this deficit is a result of out-migration within the 15-19-year-old age group as significant numbers leave to pursue education and employment opportunities elsewhere in Scotland, and further afield. A considerable proportion of the region's young people in tertiary education study outwith the region. Whilst employment and economic activity amongst the region's young people is higher than nationally, those young people who live and work in the region tend to have lower level qualifications than elsewhere in Scotland.

Since the publication of the 2015 Attitudes and Aspirations report a number of key policy developments within education, employment and infrastructure development have taken place. Increased research activity across the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) and other academic institutes in the region has helped to attract more students, and the launch of e-Sgoil in 2016 has been an important development for schools in more remote and fragile areas². The Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) programme has been implemented through the region's network of eight DYW groups. Much activity has focused on raising awareness of opportunities, and

development of work-readiness. There have also been a number of local and regional talent attraction initiatives. The Highlands and Islands Talent Attraction, Retention and Return Strategy and Action Plan³ can be considered a direct response to the issues and recommendations raised by the 2015 Attitudes and Aspirations research. The key purpose of the Strategy is to retain and attract young people to the region.

As well as a programme of major infrastructure investments to unlock employment and economic growth, the Inverness and Highland City Region Deal is delivering projects such as the Northern Innovation Hub and Science Skills Academy. These aim to develop education and career development opportunities for young people in the region. Similar projects are contained within proposals for growth deals elsewhere in the Highlands and Islands, namely Argyll and Bute, Moray and the Islands Deal.

Research by HIE has highlighted the challenge of "young and stuck" people in the Highlands and Islands — young people aged 26+ who are in full-time work but are neither the householder nor the spouse in the household.⁴ Key investments such as £5 million of funding for mid-market housing through the Inverness and Highland City Region Deal aim to target such challenges, and similar proposals are being considered in other growth deals being prepared across the region.

2. e-Sgoil uses video technology to allow teachers to deliver classes from their homes, schools or e-Sgoil hubs to schools that are unable to employ staff within a particular subject.

3. www.hie.co.uk/growth-sectors/universities/talent-attraction.html

4. www.hie.co.uk/housing2017

KEY FINDINGS

STAYING AND LEAVING

Perspectives on staying and leaving

Since 2015, an increasing number of young people want to live and work in the Highlands and Islands. Almost half (46%) of survey respondents identified themselves as committed stayers, versus 36% previously. Of those living in the Highlands and Islands, this was 55% (in 2015, it was 43%), highest in Shetland (62%), Caithness and Sutherland (55%) and Moray (51%). Conversely, the proportion of committed leavers has decreased from 34% to 22% of all respondents.

In areas of the region the majority of respondents are committed stayers, or reluctant leavers – those seeing themselves having to leave mainly through perceived lack of opportunity. Young people living in fragile areas are more likely to be reluctant leavers (17% compared to 12% for those in non-fragile areas and overall). Commitment to staying increases with age: those aged 25-30 are more likely to want to stay in the Highlands and Islands than people in the younger age categories. However, the proportion of school pupils who identify as committed leavers has fallen from 56% to 42%.

There is evidence of an increase in potential returners – those with interest in, and attraction to, living in the region, from the Highlands and Islands but living elsewhere. Young people from fragile areas are more likely to want to return than those from non-fragile areas, reflecting their strong sense of connection to their community.

The overall change in young people’s views on staying, leaving or moving to the region suggests that efforts to attract and retain young people may be starting to have a positive effect.

Over half (54%) of young people anticipate living in the Highlands and Islands in ten years’ time. Those living in Shetland, the Outer Hebrides and Lochaber, Skye and Wester Ross are the most likely to state this.

Since 2015, young people’s perceptions of other young people who stay in the Highlands and Islands has become more positive. Almost 70% agree that people who stay are lucky to be able to work or study locally. Further, fewer young people believe that those who choose to stay lack ambition. The vast majority of young people believe that those who leave want to broaden their life experience and world view, or do so to pursue education and employment opportunities. Most believe that leavers will return to the region when the time is right.

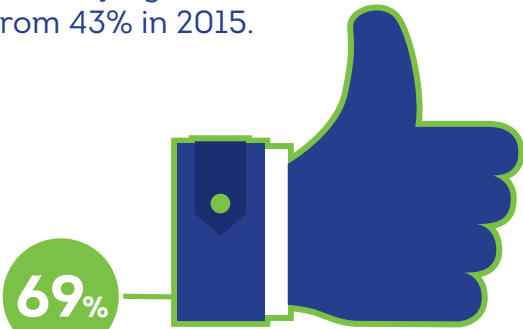
INFLUENCING FACTORS

Experiences outside of school and advice provided by family and friends are the two most important factors influencing young people’s decisions about what to do when they leave school. Knowledge, understanding and awareness of local employment opportunities are also important factors.

The majority of school pupils are happy with the choice of subjects they can study (71%), but almost half (46%) felt that the range of subjects available to them will limit their post-school options. Findings suggest that subject choices at school are more limited in fragile areas where only half of young people consider subject choices as ‘good/very good’ and 63% feel that subject availability will limit their post school options. Reluctant leavers are also more likely to believe that the range of subjects available at school limits their post-school options. This suggests that expanding subject choices and delivery modes could make a difference to the longer-term plans of young people in the Highlands and Islands. Digital technologies and other means have been used to good effect to boost the variety of provision, but awareness and uptake is still limited.

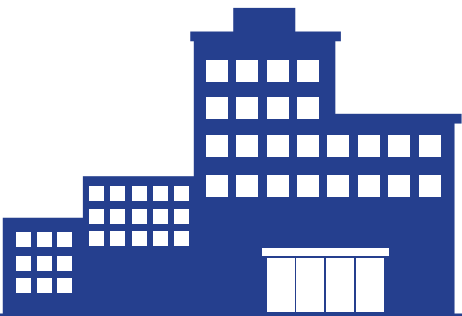


55% of young people are committed to staying in the region up from 43% in 2015.



69% of young people feel that those who stay are lucky to be able to work or study locally, up from 62% in 2015.

Of post-school pupils



71% are happy with the choice of subjects at school, falling to 50% for those in fragile areas.

46% felt the range of subjects available will limit their post-school options, rising to 63% in fragile areas.

EDUCATION

Perceptions of provision and access to opportunities

There has been a positive shift in perceptions of the educational offering in the Highlands and Islands with increases in the proportion of respondents agreeing that there is a good education offering overall (from 56% to 60%), a good range of college courses available (from 54% to 62%), and a good range of HE opportunities (from 45% to 54%). More young people reported that there are opportunities to learn remotely, with 62% identifying sufficient opportunities compared with 49% in 2015.

The expansion of education provision in the region, and developments such as Inverness Campus, have positively impacted on perceptions of availability and choice. The majority of young people studying in the Highlands and Islands choose to do so because of its educational offering and availability of courses (70%).

Course availability was viewed more positively by students currently living in fragile areas, as well as by students living in the Outer Hebrides, Shetland, and Lochaber, Skye and Wester Ross.

In addition to course availability, for those studying in the region, being closer to family and friends and affordability were the main influencing factors, with affordability being more important to students from fragile areas. Overall, nearly three-quarters (72%) of young people agree to some extent that studying in the region is more affordable to them. Almost all young people identified that course availability was the most important factor in deciding to attend a particular college or university, yet almost half agreed that FE and HE institutions in the region are unable to meet expectations regarding subject specialisation and just over two fifths in terms of course offering.

This is reflected in that not all young people are able to study subjects they want at the right level in the region. More than half of students (52%) from the Highlands and Islands study outwith the region, many to access courses that are not otherwise available to them. This demonstrates that despite improvements, there are choice limitations in both FE and HE.

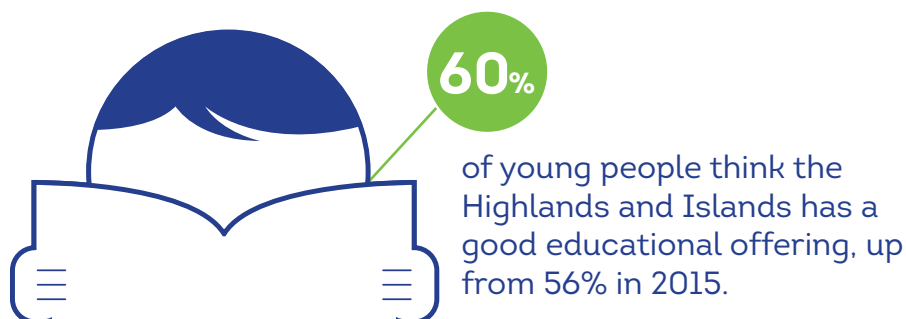
There are also a number of barriers to studying in the Highlands and Islands. Lack of transport, economic constraints, and a lack of accommodation are the main issues identified by young people currently studying in the region.

Almost half of young people studying outside the Highlands and Islands chose to do so to access new experiences or a change of scenery, and to gain some independence. These are strong pull factors: half of young people studying outwith the region would still do so even if their course was available in the Highlands and Islands, though this is less so for female students and those from fragile areas.

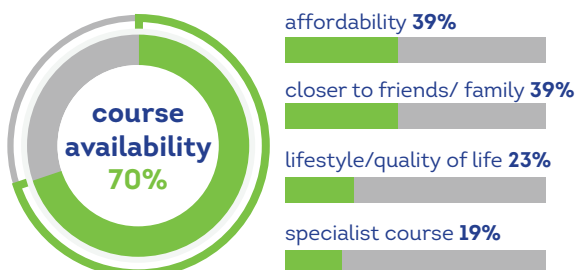
Enabling employment and career opportunities

Apprenticeships remain a less attractive route to a qualification and employment for young people. Whilst most are aware of Modern Apprenticeships (83%), a much smaller proportion appear to be interested in undertaking them, or have, or are doing so (24%), with interest being higher among males.

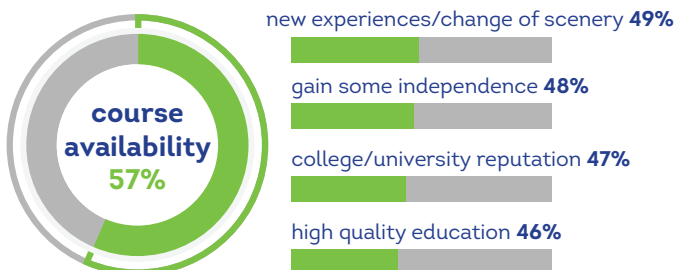
However, awareness of Graduate and Foundation Apprenticeships is lower. In common with other parts of Scotland, more needs to be done to enhance understanding about apprenticeships and encourage participation by both young people and employers.



INFLUENCING DECISION TO STUDY in the Highlands and Islands



INFLUENCING DECISION TO STUDY outwith the Highlands and Islands



KEY FINDINGS

EMPLOYMENT

Employment goals, aspirations, enablers and barriers

Full-time employment is the long-term aspiration for most young people (71%). However, lack of opportunities in their local area is a barrier to employment for 38% of young people. Young females, those in fragile areas, and in the Outer Hebrides and Caithness and Sutherland in particular, are more likely to identify a lack of local opportunities to pursue their employment goals. Young people who self-identified as committed stayers are least likely to perceive a lack of opportunities in their local area, whilst, reluctant leavers are the most likely.

A lack of housing/affordable housing was a barrier to achieving employment goals for 22% of respondents. Know-how, confidence and experience were each barriers for just under a fifth of young people.

Around half of young people (53%) are interested to some extent in starting their own business and just over two-fifths (44%) have the ideas to do so. However, access to finance and a lack of confidence or knowledge are barriers to self-employment and just under a fifth (19%) anticipate that they will be running their own business in 10 years' time. This is higher amongst 25-30 year olds than those in the younger age groups. Young people living in fragile areas are more likely than those in non-fragile areas to see self-employment as an option.

The region is becoming more attractive for young people as an option for employment. The majority of respondents (64%) want to work either in their local area (40%) or elsewhere in the Highlands and Islands (24%), and this has increased from 44% in the 2015 survey. Respondents from Shetland are most likely to want to work in their local area whilst those from the Inner Moray Firth are least likely to. Respondents from fragile areas are also more likely to want to work in their local area (51%) than those from non-fragile areas (38%).

Most young people are confident that they have the attributes and attitudes that employers are looking for. Those aged 15-18 and reluctant stayers are less confident in their ability to meet employer requirements.

Young people in the Highlands and Islands are most concerned about having a steady job, a good work-life balance and opportunities to progress. Many identify a desire to use their qualifications, which may be an influential factor for leavers – they either need or want to leave the Highlands and Islands if they can't find a suitable job.

However, whilst young people may want to stay in the region, many feel that they have to move to access opportunities and gain job experience. Some leavers are also prevented from returning to their local area due to a lack of employment opportunities.

ACCESSING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Perception of access to employment opportunities is important. Nearly 60% of young people said that the employment factors they are looking for – a steady job, good work-life balance, etc. – are available locally and in the Highlands and Islands, with young people living in Shetland most likely to feel the employment factors they are looking for are available locally. Nearly three-quarters of committed stayers said that what they are looking for in a job is available in their local area and the Highlands and Islands overall, but fewer committed (46%) and reluctant leavers (53%) had the same view.

There is a need for more information and guidance on local and regional employment opportunities. A sizeable minority reported that they don't know if the employment factors they are looking for are available across the wider region (19%), and this was particularly high amongst those aged 15-18.



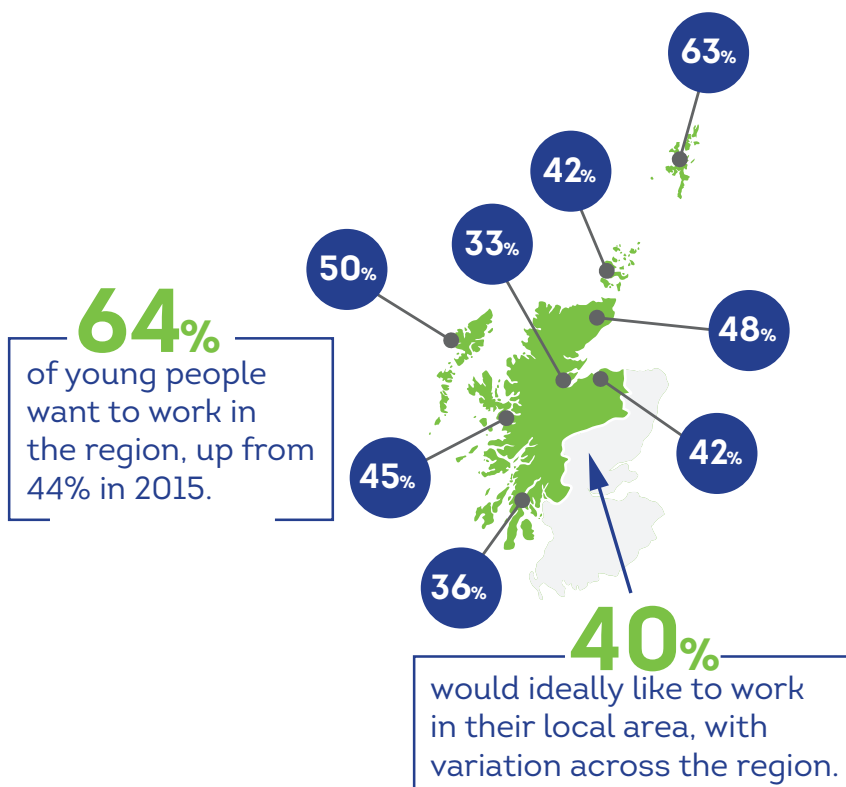
Lack of local opportunities is a barrier to achieving employment goals for

38%



53%

of young people are interested in starting their own business, but self-employment is the long-term employment goal for only 19%.





COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

Perception of the community

Young people in the Highlands and Islands have a very positive perception of their local town or community. They feel it is a safe place, with a good quality of life, a good place to bring up a family and to live as a young person, and somewhere they feel included. It is also somewhere they are increasingly proud to be associated with. More young people in 2018 indicated that they are proud of the place they currently live (87% compared to 78% in 2015).

Half of young people agree that their community is a place where it is okay to be different, in line with 2015. However, this is lower for young people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, which points to a need for more proactive inclusion of different groups within communities.

Since the 2015 survey, there has been a sharp decline in the proportion of young people agreeing that their community is a place where young peoples' needs are being met (from 54% to 37%), with this being lowest in Caithness and Sutherland (19%).

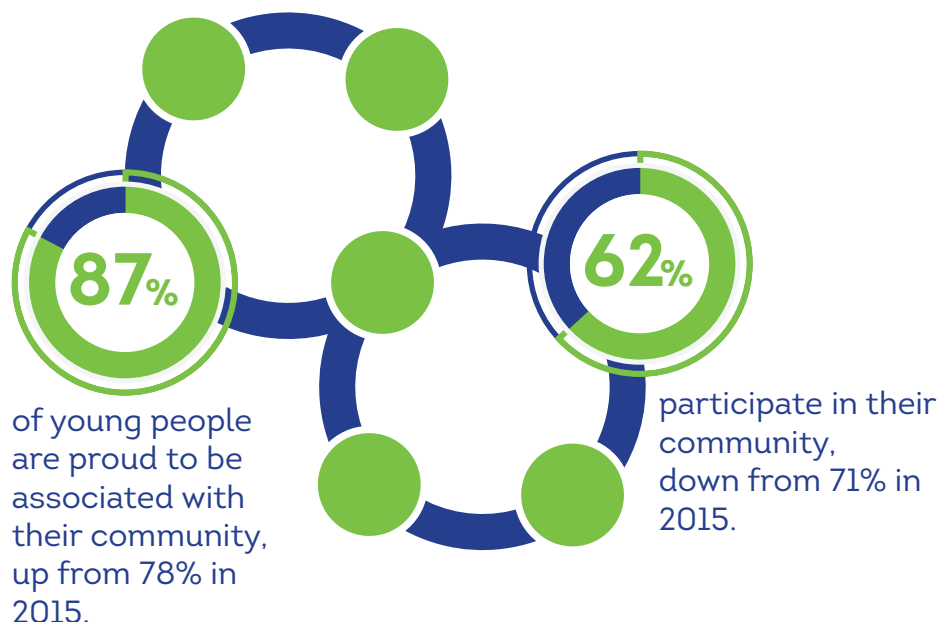
Community participation

Overall, young people in the Highlands and Islands have a good connection with their local community, with three in five reporting some form of community participation (62%) including attending events (40%), volunteering for a charity/community group (29%) and membership of youth groups/sports clubs (25%). Reflecting findings in 2015, community participation is highest in Orkney, Shetland and the Outer Hebrides, and in fragile areas more broadly. However, engagement has dropped somewhat since 2015, with participation in local politics (8%) and board membership of community/charitable organisations (7%) particularly low. Young people aged 19 years or over are less likely than those aged 15-18 to participate in their communities.

The Highlands and Islands as a place to live

Young people in the Highlands and Islands report a good level of engagement with arts, leisure and culture, with many reporting that their local offering is strong. Those in island communities engage most frequently with arts, leisure and culture, while those in Moray, Lochaber, Skye and Wester Ross and Caithness and Sutherland tend to have the lowest levels of engagement. Outdoor activities, gyms/leisure centres and outdoor attractions are the most common forms of engagement. Evening classes do not appear to be particularly popular with young people.

There is often a mismatch between the demand for arts, leisure and cultural offers and young peoples' ability to access them. This was reflected in the research, with barriers cited generally relating to limited accessibility rather than the quality of amenities or a lack of interest amongst young people. The main barrier to taking part in arts, leisure and cultural offerings is a lack of local availability, with young people from Lochaber, Skye and Wester Ross being particularly likely to identify this. Cost and a lack of transport to reach them are also barriers. Young people experience fewest barriers when accessing outdoor activities, outdoor attractions and gyms/leisure centres.



**“THE HIGHLANDS
AND ISLANDS
IS SUCH A
WONDERFUL PLACE
AND I ALWAYS LOVE
TELLING PEOPLE
THAT IS WHERE
I AM FROM”**

(survey respondent aged 25-30)



COMPROMISING ON OPPORTUNITIES

Compromises to live, work and study in the Highlands and Islands

Young people clearly think that life in the Highlands and Islands requires making compromises on some aspects of life, and this is a barrier to young people living, studying and working in the region. The majority of respondents (87%) think that people have to make compromises in order to live, work and study in the Highlands and Islands. This is particularly high amongst committed leavers, reluctant stayers, reluctant leavers and potential returners. Geographical variations were marked, with perceptions and experience of compromise being most prevalent in remote and fragile parts of the Highlands and Islands.

Compromising on employment and career progression

Young people consider significant compromises are necessary in employment. Most feel that there are fewer job (76%) and career progression (62%) opportunities in the region compared to the rest of Scotland, and this is most marked among those living in more remote and fragile areas, and amongst female respondents. Almost half (46%) feel that people have to settle for a lower salary in the Highlands and Islands, and this is a critical challenge in terms of talent attraction and retention.

Access to a smaller variety of opportunities, some of which are less suitable (e.g. working at a lower level, or in a field unrelated to their education and qualifications) is also considered a compromise. However, there is some evidence that the variety of employment choice is gradually improving.

Underemployment is a particular issue for young people in more remote areas, and for females. It also emerges as an indirect issue in population attraction and retention, affecting spouses and family.

A considerable proportion of young people in the Highlands and Islands feel that they have already compromised on employment (40%) and career progression (31%) opportunities. However, a significant proportion of young people (almost two-fifths) would not be prepared to make a compromise on employment, career progression or salary. The prospect of such compromises is a significant push factor for young people.

Education compromises

Despite broadened curricula and improved access to courses, more than 60% of young people report that access to fewer college and university courses in the Highlands and Islands is a necessary compromise for studying in the region. Accepting this compromise is something that around a quarter of young people in the Highlands and Islands have either done (29%), or are prepared to do (24%). Those in Shetland and Caithness and Sutherland are most likely to have made such compromises.

Almost two-fifths of young people state that they would not be prepared to compromise on education choice. Those in Orkney and those aged 15-18 are least likely to accept this compromise. This is undoubtedly a factor in the decision of many young people to leave the region to pursue education opportunities. However, there is evidence that curriculum expansion, alignment to industry need and improving access are having a positive effect.

Compromising on transport

Transport underpins access to a wide range of other economic, social and cultural opportunities, but almost 80% of young people agree that more difficult and expensive transport in the Highlands and Islands is something that people generally accept. Transport is also a factor that most young people have made compromises on (61%), and females are more likely to have done so than males.

Compromising on accommodation

While most young people do not perceive that it is necessary to compromise on housing to live in the Highlands and Islands, this perception is influenced by age and current living arrangements: those at the older end of the target age band (aged 25-30) those living outwith the family home, and those not yet in home ownership have a different experience and expectation of housing issues, and are more likely to find accommodation challenging.

Almost 20% of young people feel they have compromised on accommodation. This is more likely in Argyll and the Islands and Lochaber, Skye and Wester Ross. Those at the upper end of the target age band and reluctant leavers are also more likely to say they have compromised on housing. However, housing is emerging as a significant barrier for young people and a factor on which 34% of respondents would not be prepared to compromise.

Living compromises: services, amenities, connectivity

Limitations of the leisure, amenities and connectivity offering for young people in the Highlands and Islands can be a major driver for young people to seek education and employment opportunities elsewhere. Compromising on access to cultural amenities and services is perceived as necessary by 65% of young people in the region and 47% report that they have made such compromises. A similar proportion think that they have compromised on access to good mobile connectivity (45%), and 37% on digital connectivity to live in the area. Young people in fragile areas are more likely to have made these compromises.

Quality of life as a compromise?

Very few young people see quality of life as an area of compromise in the Highlands and Islands; instead it is considered a real strength. For this factor, the largest proportion of young people in the region (44%) felt that no such compromise exists. Respondents from fragile areas and island communities are much more likely to agree that there is no quality of life compromise to be made to live in the region.

87% OF YOUNG PEOPLE THINK THAT LIFE IN THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS REQUIRES MAKING COMPROMISES ON SOME ASPECTS OF LIFE.

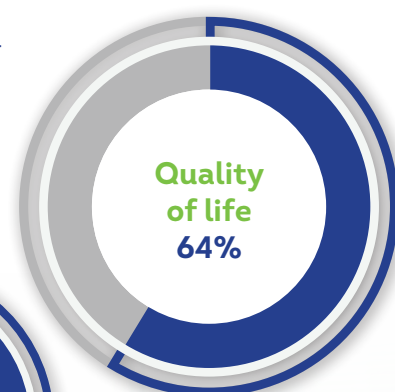
ENABLING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The majority of young people see high quality jobs, transport, good pay levels and career progression opportunities as essential to making the region an attractive place for young people. Education-related factors are viewed almost as critical.

Reflecting this, in terms of economic factors enabling young people to live, work and study in the Highlands and Islands, employment related aspects (good pay levels, availability of high-quality jobs and career progression opportunities), as well as low cost of living are ranked most highly. These are long-term rather than short-term considerations, and as the factors most valued by young people, are critical for talent attraction and retention.

Social factors continue to be highly important in making the Highlands and Islands an attractive place for young people. Good quality of life, access to good healthcare and access to affordable housing are all rated most highly. Young people in the Outer Hebrides are more likely to consider that sense of community is essential (50% versus 38% overall), whilst more young people in Orkney (50% compared to 47%) think that low levels of crime are essential. Those in Shetland are most likely to consider that access to affordable childcare is essential (57% versus 44% of all respondents).

Top three social factors that would make the region a more attractive place to live work and study:



Top four economic factors that would make the region a more attractive place to live, work and study



MAXIMISING OPPORTUNITIES

Future Considerations

The study evidences the positive improvement across a range of factors since 2015, which suggests interventions by HIE and strategic partners are making a difference to young people. There are some strong findings for HIE and partners to capitalise upon. First, young people consider that quality of life in the Highlands and Islands is excellent and not something they need to compromise on. The importance of this cannot be understated.

Second, when identifying features that make the region an attractive place to live, work and study in, there is a clear preference amongst young people for:

- **Longer-term economic considerations:** high quality, well-paid job opportunities with good career progression prospects, and a relatively low cost of living; and
- **Social elements that enhance life in the region,** particularly quality of life, affordable housing, and access to essential services such as good healthcare.

These factors can underpin all other considerations in ensuring that the region is in the best position to respond to the aspirations of young people. It should also drive longer-term policy to ensure that policy interventions to meet the needs of young people are 'future-proofed'.

However, whilst progress has been made, this has not been equal across the region: equality of access is a key issue going forward.

Existing policies and interventions

Many current interventions directly (or indirectly) addressing barriers and opportunities for young people are at an early stage. Consequently, it makes sense to not substantially change any approaches being taken: these interventions should be given the necessary time to have a demonstrable impact.

There has been a shift in focus in terms of talent attraction, retention and return, away from an almost exclusive focus on young people to focusing on the entire working age population more broadly. However, there remains a need to continue to factor young people into policy decisions and interventions. The deficit and continued out-migration of young people in the region is a major component of demographic change in the region, and strategic partners should not lose sight of this.

One way to ensure this is to involve young people in service and policy design. The Year of Young People has seen greater involvement of young people in the planning and design of events, activities, etc.

There is scope to continue this and involve young people on a more permanent basis, e.g. regular involvement in policy design activities. This could also have positive implications for community participation, including in local democracy.

Regional approaches, local tailoring

There is scope to capitalise on the extensive intelligence of skills demand and supply for the region provided by the Highlands and Islands Skills Investment Plan (SIP), Regional and Sectoral Skills Assessments and additional sectoral work undertaken by HIE and partners. This could be done through the development of more locally-based SIPs, targeting specific geographies and key sectors. This would help to develop a more bespoke approach to skills challenges, and better inform local policy response.

This should be done within a regional framework for skills and workforce planning, to help retain skills within the region, rather than just within local areas. There is a criticism that workforce planning at a local level can be counterproductive. Ensuring collaboration at regional level should result in a more strategic and effective approach to attracting and retaining skills within the Highlands and Islands.

The Talent Attraction, Retention and Return Strategy should be further developed, with specific young people segmentations targeted. The offer to potential returners, potential new residents and reluctant leavers should be carefully articulated. DYW groups are best placed to package such an offer for those living outside the area to return or move here for the first time.

Consideration should be given to how the Inverness and Highland City Region Deal projects can effectively permeate the rest of the region. Highland Council, HIE and other partners should ensure that the benefits of projects such as the Northern Innovation Hub are realised pan-regionally. Whilst other parts of the region are progressing their own growth deals, HIE and partners should explore how best to transfer learning from Inverness and Highland City Region Deal delivery to maximise benefit.





ENABLING OUR NEXT GENERATION

Studying in the Highlands and Islands

Further and higher education

The FE and HE course offer in the region has seen a step-change. UHI's work on horizon scanning activity has helped in this regard. However, there is still scope to further improve this, as demonstrated by the perceptions of young people. Subject range needs to be as wide as possible. UHI, partner colleges and other providers therefore need to work better with SDS and with employers to better match FE provision to the needs of local and regional economies, and ensure that skills and training provision is much more agile in responding to industry need and emerging opportunities. There is a role here for HIE's Regional Skills Manager and DYW groups to facilitate this relationship.

Remote learning and networking of courses throughout UHI's partner institutions and local centres has an important role to play in broadening access to learning and education opportunities. This should be supported and expanded to further its reach, particularly in more remote and fragile areas.

Apprenticeship family

Work-based and vocational learning is highly valued by employers as providing skills development for staff in the workplace that is considered to be more effective and aligned to working practices. There is scope to better promote the value and relevance of apprenticeship family qualifications amongst young people. Some apprenticeships are already delivered on an outreach basis across the region, and this can be an effective means through which to broaden the education offer in remote areas.

Education and employment advice

School teachers and other influencers (e.g. family) may not have full or up-to-date knowledge of employment and career opportunities available to young people across the region. There is a need to better influence the influencers. Providing current and relevant regional labour market intelligence to careers advisors can help to raise awareness of wider regional opportunities outside their catchment or local authority area. There is scope also to engage with a wider range of stakeholders to change their mindset regarding education pathways, and better promote employment and career opportunities – especially through non-academic pathways. This will require a strong partnership approach.

Working in the Highlands and Islands

Routes to employment

An important aspect of widening employment opportunities in the Highlands and Islands is to broaden routes to employment. There is scope to undertake complementary activity to promoting apprenticeship routes to young people, and work with employers to diversify recruitment practice. There is still strong business emphasis on degree qualifications, to the detriment of other equally relevant qualifications.

A change in recruitment and training practices amongst employers to give greater credence to Graduate Level Apprenticeships, '2+2' routes where students articulate from HNCs/HNDs to degrees, etc. will help to broaden employment opportunities for the region's young people, and ensure parity of education routes to employment. This may also help to boost "middle ground" skilled trades opportunities in areas characterised by low and/or high-skills level employment opportunities. Boosting the ScotGrad scheme and expanding uptake of graduate placements in the region can also help in this regard.

Entrepreneurship and self-employment should be more widely promoted and encouraged as a viable route to employment. Such opportunities exist, yet young people broadly do not see this as an option.

Opportunities for remote working are slowly increasing in some sectors. To exploit these and meet the demand for flexible and remote working amongst young people will require a significant step-change amongst more employers. Strategic partners should identify ways in which this can be enabled – and then to connect young people to flexible and remote working opportunities.



Promoting sectoral opportunities

There are also a range of key sectoral developments that can be exploited to provide a wider range of employment opportunities for young people. This includes recent work that identified significant opportunities for the marine economy in the region. Workforce development and routes to employment for education leavers will be key to realising its potential. Renewable energy also offers employment opportunities through both construction and operation and maintenance. There are some significant large-scale schemes currently under development, and there will be opportunities in early learning and childcare and social care, sectors that will see growth as demand increases.

For many of these sectors, there is a need to 'reposition or rebrand' to overcome outdated and misplaced perceptions which still exist, e.g. around aquaculture or engineering. Strategic public-sector partners and employers have a role to play in creating positive perceptions to engage young people. This can also help to address issues of gender segregation evident in a number of sectors and roles.

Living in the Highlands and Islands

Infrastructure

The importance of the necessary infrastructure to underpin employment opportunities, and particularly housing and transport, is recognised by HIE and other strategic partners. Recent policy responses to increase the supply of affordable housing and properties to rent should continue to be actively promoted, particularly in light of development proposals in some areas. Multi-agency partnership working to address transport challenges can also help to address barriers to employment and learning.

Amenities, services and culture

The importance of the cultural offer, services and amenities available to young people in local areas should not be underestimated. Improvement of the offer should be supported, to meet the needs of young people in the region. Given there has been a decline in the proportion of young people feeling that their communities are not fully meeting their needs, HIE and partners should investigate this further to ensure that the needs of young people are being fully met within their communities.

Taking a longer-term strategic approach

Since 2015 there has been a concerted effort to factor in the needs of young people in policy interventions designed to improve the economic fortunes of the region. The findings from over 3,100 young people demonstrate that there has been some success in a relatively short period of time.

To ensure continued success, there is a need to take a longer-term strategic approach. Young people are motivated by long-term considerations; as such, policy responses should reflect this. With the Inverness and Highland City Region Deal and proposed growth deals elsewhere in the region being programmed over a minimum 10-year period, policies to address issues faced by young people should take a similar tack. Also, as identified, progress has not been equal across the region and therefore ensuring equality of access to opportunities as an important issue for the future.

This will of course not be for HIE to deliver in isolation. Rather, a co-ordinated partnership approach, involving actors at local, regional and national levels, will be required to maximise the opportunities that exist for young people.

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