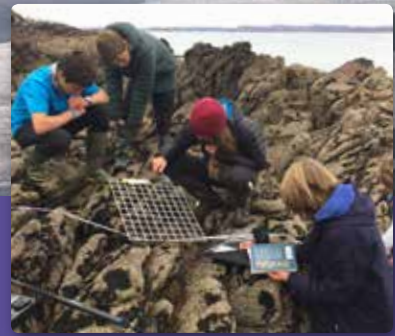


# NorthWest2045



OUR FUTURE, OUR CHOICE



## A Community Vision for the Future of the North West Highlands

Lèirsinn Coimhearsnachdan Iar-thuath na  
Gàidhealtachd airson an Àm ri Teachd

July 2021 An t-Iuchar 2021



*Maree Todd*

Member of Scottish Parliament –  
Caithness, Sutherland and Ross

## Foreword *Facal-toisich*

I am delighted to introduce the NorthWest2045 Community Vision for the Future of the North West Highlands. This represents a remarkable coming together of community groups, local development trusts, landowners, charities and statutory bodies, to define and push for a more prosperous and sustainable future.

Their vision, of a place that is attractive for young people and families to live and work, with a diverse and sustainable rural economy, where communities are empowered to determine their own prospects, is one that has been created in collaboration with local people: Those growing up, going to school, living and working in the North West Highlands. I too share in this vision.

The following document contains bold ambition and clarity of purpose. It is an important step toward realising our shared aspirations and I would like to offer my congratulations to all involved in its creation. What it also makes clear, are the challenges faced by the North West Highlands here and now, as well as the work we must do to overcome those challenges and build toward a brighter future. In this, you have my continuing support.



IMAGE © GARY MACLEOD PHOTOGRAPHY

# Introduction Ro-ràdh

The North West Highlands is a place of striking landscapes, and communities challenged by changing circumstances.

The NorthWest2045 Project comprises community groups; local development trusts; statutory bodies; and community, private and eNGO landowners from across the North West Highlands: from Achiltibuie, Coigach in the south, north to Durness and east to Bettyhill.

Our aim is to make clear the challenges we face and help point to the solutions that we can stand united behind.

The area we represent is more sparsely populated than the Western Isles,<sup>i</sup> our school rolls are falling, affordable housing is gone, our population is declining and our citizens are aging.

Our geography and transport infrastructure give rise to many of the challenges that are also faced on Scotland's islands<sup>ii</sup>. Our communities have higher-than-average vulnerability to the socioeconomic impacts of Covid and Brexit (see page 5 for details), which further exacerbates many of these pre-existing problems.

While there are support mechanisms in place from a range of statutory bodies to address inequalities and encourage effective placemaking, they are not always appropriate for sparsely populated areas such as ours. For example, methods of data gathering can make it hard to elucidate need in rural areas, where the wealth of some people masks pockets of disadvantage in the aggregate data. This need is demonstrated by the precipitous decline in our population over many decades, and the way that data is gathered and decisions are made on investments for rural areas in mainland Scotland does not seem to be halting this decline.

We live here by choice, and we recognise our privileges and the world-class natural and cultural assets that surround our communities. The land, sea and wildlife have multiple Protections and Designations that demonstrate their value on a national and even global level; we are key stewards of these vitally important assets. The peat and boglands are part of the widest expanse in Europe – a critical carbon sink<sup>iii</sup>, and we have



## Our long term goals

We need support from government to

- ▶ Stimulate repopulation to see our school rolls rise to at least 50%–60% of capacity by 2045, from the current levels of 29%<sup>vi</sup>
- ▶ Carry out an urgent review of why existing statutory mechanisms are failing to reverse depopulation in sparsely populated mainland rural areas.
- ▶ Explore legislative options to give voice to rural mainland areas where the population is low but the value to the nation of our public goods is high (in our cultural and environmental assets) – learning from the success of the Islands Bill. When we have greater say in the issues that affect us, we can be more effective stewards of our place and our people, and this will help to achieve a Just Transition for our future local economy and livelihoods.

## The context<sup>vii</sup>



### Connectivity:

58.8% of households here do not have access to superfast broadband, compared to 3% nationally



### Scottish Government per capita spending:

Highland: £2544  
Western Isles: £4146  
Shetland: £4589



### School rolls:

High School rolls across the area are at an average of just 29% of their capacity and are forecast to fall by a quarter to 22% by 2035



### Welfare:

From March-December 2020, North and West Sutherland saw a 153% increase in Universal Credit claimants



### Population decline:

Sutherland is projected to experience a 12% population decline from 2016-2040 in contrast to the Scottish projection of a 2.5% rise from 2018-2043

## Population sparsity

The area of almost 3000km<sup>2</sup> has a population of ~3000 people, giving us a density of 1.12 people/km<sup>2</sup>; compared with an average of 70 people/km<sup>2</sup> across Scotland, and the Western Isles of 9 people/km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>xii</sup>

ample space for native woodland. Meanwhile, our oceans absorb 'blue carbon' at approximately three times the rate of our forests<sup>iv</sup>,

with the west coast being a particular hot spot of sequestration<sup>v</sup>. We hope these assets will enable us to capitalise on opportunities emerging from climate change mitigation strategies and the push to net zero carbon emissions by 2045. Our small communities are mutually supportive, innovative and motivated; this is the home of Scotland's first community land purchases almost 30 years ago.

We look to a future where our population grows sustainably, job opportunities broaden and average salaries rise. This will require a resilient and diverse economic base which makes the best use of our many assets while enhancing local skills and opportunities.

The NorthWest2045 project has engaged intensively with communities via a variety of interviews, surveys and workshops, with a particular effort to amplify the voice of the young people, and has reached an estimated 10% of the population<sup>viii</sup>.

The resulting **Vision for 2045** has three key elements:

### 1: A place that is attractive for young people and families to live and work

*To deliver this we need sufficient housing, suitable infrastructure and services and a quality education for our communities.*

### 2: A model for a new diverse and sustainable rural economy

*We are ready to capitalise on emerging opportunities, attract new enterprises and promote traditional livelihoods.*

### 3: A place where our communities can determine their own prospects

*Our area comprises 3.5%<sup>ix</sup> of the landmass of Scotland and 13% of National Scenic Areas<sup>s</sup>, but has only 0.06%<sup>xi</sup> of the population.*

*There are considerable natural assets under our stewardship, and we therefore need the voice to influence decisions on these and wider issues affecting our place and communities.*

These three essential elements are interconnected, and the partners of the NorthWest2045 Project are committed to collaborating with each other and

building capacity within our communities to reach the Vision. We are developing a roadmap to help achieve these goals which identifies the key steps.

For effective delivery we need the support of a range of partners and agencies to:

1. Ensure affordable and accessible local housing solutions are available so that young people and families are able to stay and be part of the community. Develop a long-term strategy across the area by 2026, with delivery thereafter.  
**Key partners:** *Communities Housing Trust, The Highland Council, Crofting Commission and landowners*
2. Deliver local solutions to broadband to make it possible for everyone in our settlements to work and learn remotely, and address problems of overloaded infrastructure and facilities.  
**Key partners:** *Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Scottish Government*
3. Create 6 rural hubs across our area to meet rising interest in remote work and enterprise. and deliver key services in the heart of our communities.  
**Key partners:** *Scottish Futures Trust, local public sector bodies*
4. Scope and develop a local food strategy that enhances the health of the land and our people:  
**Key partners:** *Scottish Government, Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Highland Good Food Partnership*
5. Develop new approaches to land management, including through a Regional Land Use pilot, and help promote viable food production.  
**Key partners:** *Scottish Government, Scottish Land Commission, Highland Council, Crofting Commission*
6. Invest in community resilience and explore new thinking to allow the voice of communities living in sparsely populated areas to articulate their own needs, and the benefits that inward investment will provide for the wider public good.  
**Key partners:** *Scottish Government, Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise*

Our current trajectory foresees a degenerative cycle of depopulation; dwindling jobs; school closures and loss of services. Without action, the North West Highlands will lose its vibrancy and cultural value.

With strategic support, delivery of an inspired vision can help catalyse a regenerative cycle producing a sustainable, repopulated rural economy and contributing to our national economic and environmental wealth, that supports resilient, thriving communities.

# Vision 1:

## A place that is attractive for young people and families to live and work

### Àite tarraingeach do dhaoine òga agus do theaghlaichean

We desire to live in a sustainable economy where **housing is affordable**, accessible and energy efficient. **Modern and sustainable infrastructure** will help us meet the needs of residents and visitors and **quality education** across the area – with a full curriculum and a variety of extra-curricular experiences – will ensure young people and families do not need to move away to better their prospects. We hope the nascent Repopulation Zones concept can support these aims in the coming decades.

“Housing needs are at a critical level, and skilled, committed young families are being lost to the area.”

25-39, Coigach

### Where can we start?

## Action 1. Develop affordable local housing solutions

Several community organisations within our partnership (Scourie Community Development Company and Assynt Development Trust) are developing local housing projects, and two landowners (WildLand Ltd. and John Muir Trust) are exploring opportunities for making best use of existing crofts and making new land available for housing and crofting. The partners will work together to share learning and coordinate strategically with key local partners.

### Housing<sup>xiii</sup>

- In Tongue social housing provision is at 9.8% – well below the national average of 24.3%.
- An average house in Coigach is 7x higher than average local income: out of reach of most working age residents.
- In our area between 68-83% of households are estimated to be in fuel poverty.

### Our asks:

- ▶ Further research is required to better understand the nuance of local housing need (for example, social housing versus affordable homes for purchase) to ensure innovative local solutions for affordable housing to redress depopulation. With support from key partners the Communities Housing Trust and Highland Council.
- ▶ Research findings inform an area-wide strategic response to ensure sufficient housing is planned for – and underway – by the end of this parliament and delivered by 2045.



IMAGE © DAVID BALHARRY



IMAGE © EWEN MACLACHLAN

## Action 2. Explore local solutions to infrastructure and broadband

We want to improve access to key services for our residents, targeting support and solutions in areas that most need it; to ensure our facilities and roads are fit for purpose, and bring superfast broadband to all households.

### Our asks:

- ▶ Support from HIE on developing community-led alternatives for broadband in areas the market cannot yet reach, learning from the Highland Community Broadband model and using funds such as the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme and the UK Government’s Project Gigabit.
- ▶ Targeted investment in roads and facilities to meet tourism demand and bring benefit to communities, potentially through existing mechanisms such as the UK Levelling Up Fund and the £25m Tourism Fund from Scottish Government.

### What can we build on locally and learn from elsewhere?

**Highland Community Broadband** is a Community Interest Company which formed to bring highspeed broadband to Ullapool and the outlying areas which had been told they would never receive it. The system uses an ingenious network broadcasting from small masts located on rocks and hills, crossing open water and wide areas, to reach remote dwellings.

**Staffin Housing Development** is a development of six three-bedroom houses, a new health centre and two business premises on croft land – led by Staffin Community Trust on Skye in partnership with Communities Housing Trust and Lochalsh and Skye Housing Association. It is the first affordable housing development in Staffin since 1998, and followed a housing needs report which identified a clear local demand for new homes.

# Vision 2:

## A model for a new diverse and sustainable rural economy

### Modail ùr de threabhadas dùthchail seasmhach iolarach

Developing a diverse, more resilient local economy is of utmost importance for our communities, and it will take time. Achieving more well-paid, skilled and stable jobs is a priority, and we see many routes to achieving these goals. We need to ensure that the **investment in renewable energy** benefits communities – whether through community led or commercial schemes, and that **natural capital investment** in land and sea leads to opportunities for us to gain from our substantial carbon stocks, whether directly through carbon credits or in new ‘green’ jobs.

“There needs to be more diversifying of incomes, so the communities can take a knock in one sector and bounce back as the others support them when one is down. We do not want communities that are vulnerably reliant on a monoculture of sectors or industries.”

40-59, Bettyhill, Crofting



IMAGE © CALLP

We would like to explore ways of making **traditional livelihoods and industries** economically viable – and resilient to the climate crises, specifically recognising the contribution that changes to crofting practices can make to local food production, and how our local fishing fleet can develop local and national markets. Government changes to rural policy around local food, land use and the Crofting National Development Plan could provide significant benefit and support to these precarious livelihoods. There are a number of strategic policy developments that can help: the challenge is to have the local voice heard.

We desire a sustainable, slow form of tourism that promotes deeper connection to our people, our culture and our landscapes.

We seek to attract and seed **new business and industry** to become less dependent on a few employers. We believe digital connectivity and modern facilities can enable diverse careers and flourishing enterprises for those attracted by the quality of life in this beautiful place.

### ***Where can we start?***

### **Action 3: Develop the case for multi-use rural hubs**

Thriving community spaces are a priority for local infrastructure development. These can host a range of activities such as community groups, childcare, drop in health and welfare services and co-working and enterprise spaces. We want to explore how to maximise existing assets to meet local needs by providing several services in one place. Such ‘multi-use hubs’ would differ from place to place depending on requirements and resources, and we will learn from innovative models elsewhere. We anticipate that interest in co-working spaces will increase in response to the recent rise in remote working, and hope that more local public sector staff will work from these hubs.

### **Economy**<sup>xiv</sup>

- Caithness & Sutherland is more reliant on sectors affected by the pandemic lockdown – such as accommodation and food services (15.6%) – than nationally (8.2%) and is considered 28% more vulnerable to the impacts of Brexit than the wider region.
- Caithness & Sutherland are within the 20% most Brexit-vulnerable communities in Scotland compared to 43% regionally.



IMAGE © EWEN MACLACHLAN

### Our asks:

- ▶ Work in partnership with existing Rural Hub schemes (including the Scottish Futures Trust) to build a case for investment and develop 6 local hubs across our area, enabling us to work towards the '20-minute neighbourhood' aspiration of Scottish Government.
- ▶ Support from local public service partners to extend existing service provision through these facilities and accelerate the possibilities of employing staff to work out of these hubs as part of a commitment to Local Place Planning for our area.

### Action 4. Scope a local food strategy

We have potential to produce more high quality, sustainable – and even regenerative – food and drink in this area, and to stimulate local markets for local products. This would have wide-ranging benefits, including reduction of local and global environmental impact; support of local businesses, and the health and well-being of our residents.

### Our asks:

- ▶ Work in partnership with public and private sector bodies to promote existing regional initiatives such as the Highland Good Food Partnership; to understand the potential in our area and support a coordinated approach to producing and consuming more sustainable food locally.

### What can we build on locally and learn from elsewhere?

**Coigach Community Wind Turbine** is a single 500kW turbine, owned by the Community and managed by a subsidiary of Coigach Community Development Trust. It has been turning since 2017 and profits are distributed by the Small Grants Fund. This Fund supports a variety of actions to improve Health and Well-being, develop individual skills and training, and meet critical needs - for example emergency funding to families during the Covid pandemic.

**The Green Bowl** in Elphin is an example of small producers collaborating to build the critical mass needed to market their produce efficiently. The '**Open Food Network UK**' hosts an online shop which enables flexibility for producers to come-and-go throughout the year as their supply allows.

**Lynbreck Croft** have worked with Forest Carbon to have their woodland regeneration project validated as Carbon Credits under the Woodland Carbon Code. This practical contribution to tackling the climate emergency provides extra income to the Croft.



# Vision 3:

## A place where our communities can determine their own prospects

### Coimhearsnachdan aig stiùir am beatha fhèin

We desire for our communities to have a clear voice in shaping the prospects of our place and in decisions made about land and other natural resources. Ensuring we are sufficiently represented is a challenge due to our small population and large geographic area.

We see an opportunity to promote **Community Wealth Building** to **stimulate local investment** in jobs, skills and produce. We must build **strong local democracy and voice**, reinvigorating and reinforcing our local democratic structures and community groups. This will ensure a wider diversity of voices can influence decisions at the local level and will position our area to engage more effectively in regional and national decisions. We wish to use and create opportunities for **communities to positively influence decisions about land use and ownership locally** and ensure that we have a **rich community life and activities** for all age groups.

“Because there is so little power it stops people from getting involved, what’s the point if nothing is achieved...There are so many competent people who are hiding because they feel they have no power to achieve anything”

60, Bettyhill

#### What do we want to do?

### Action 5. Develop new approaches to land management

Regional Land Use Partnerships enable national and local government, land owners, local communities and other stakeholders to fairly and inclusively optimise land use, in order to meet local and national objectives and help achieve Scotland’s climate change targets. Highland Council is one of the first Local Authorities to trial the RLUP approach, and we are in discussions about the NorthWest2045 Project

area becoming the pilot for this work. This is a vital chance to explore how the drive for carbon sequestration will create long term opportunities for investment, industry, skills and jobs.

#### Crofting<sup>xv</sup>

- 87% of respondents to a Crofting Commission survey (across crofting counties) identified unused crofts as an issue and 90% of respondents indicated that lack of availability to new entrants is an issue.

#### Our asks:

- ▶ Support from Scottish Government, Scottish Land Commission (SLC) and Highland Council for the NorthWest2045 partners to develop an RLUP, and broker land investment opportunities.
- ▶ Working with SLC to use existing protocols to promote dialogue between communities and landowners regarding decisions on land use, and encouraging the Crofting Commission to better enforce existing duties for Crofting.
- ▶ Use existing mechanisms, with the support of the Crofting Commission, to improve access to crofts for new entrants. Explore the potential for creating local Crofting Development Officers for the region, learning from the new posts in the Western Isles.

### Action 6. Invest in community resilience and voice

#### What do we want to do?

Our population is small but our land area is large. A significant proportion of the land (60%<sup>xvi</sup>) is protected because of its important contribution to the nation’s public goods and services: we are therefore key stewards of these crucial natural and cultural assets. However, the sparseness of our population leads to a democratic deficit: our voice is not heard on issues that matter to us such as housing, land use and resource allocation. We want to learn from other examples, such as the Islands Bill, which has given voice to sparsely populated rural areas similar to ours, so that their needs are met and they can then be more effective stewards of the crucial natural assets.

Furthermore, community action is a key strength of our place – but there are gaps, and volunteers are stretched. We must support and encourage people of all ages and backgrounds to participate in community life and have their voice heard, and to help places with low community capacity ‘level up’ with better-resourced areas. Strengthening collaboration across



IMAGE © CALLP

the area will help to maximise knowledge, skills and resources and enable coordinated strategic action on key issues. Learning from peers elsewhere and key agencies working in rural community development, such as the Scottish Rural Parliament will support improved practice.

### Our asks:

- ▶ Learning from the success of the Islands Bill, explore a legislative mechanism to give voice to rural mainland areas, to ensure a Just Transition for our future local economy and livelihoods.
- ▶ Assistance to explore ways of strengthening our local democracy – such as reinvigorating

### Democracy<sup>xvii</sup>

The electorate for North, West and Central Sutherland is 4833 represented by 3 Councillors. The latest proposals are that this should be reduced to 2 councillors giving a ratio of just over 1:2400. The target ratio for Highland is 1:2800, while in the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland it is 1:800.

our Community Councils – would enable a wider diversity of people to feel empowered and inspired to participate in creating the society they believe in. We are interested

to work with the Council to test ideas emerging from the Local Governance Review.

- ▶ Targeted support to build local capacity to seize existing and emerging opportunities for funding, training and development, coordinate learning

with peers nationally and internationally, and to work with Government and other agencies on common goals. Paid workers employed by a partnership of local community organisations to work across the area, to share resources and skills and identify strategic opportunities for collaboration is a priority.

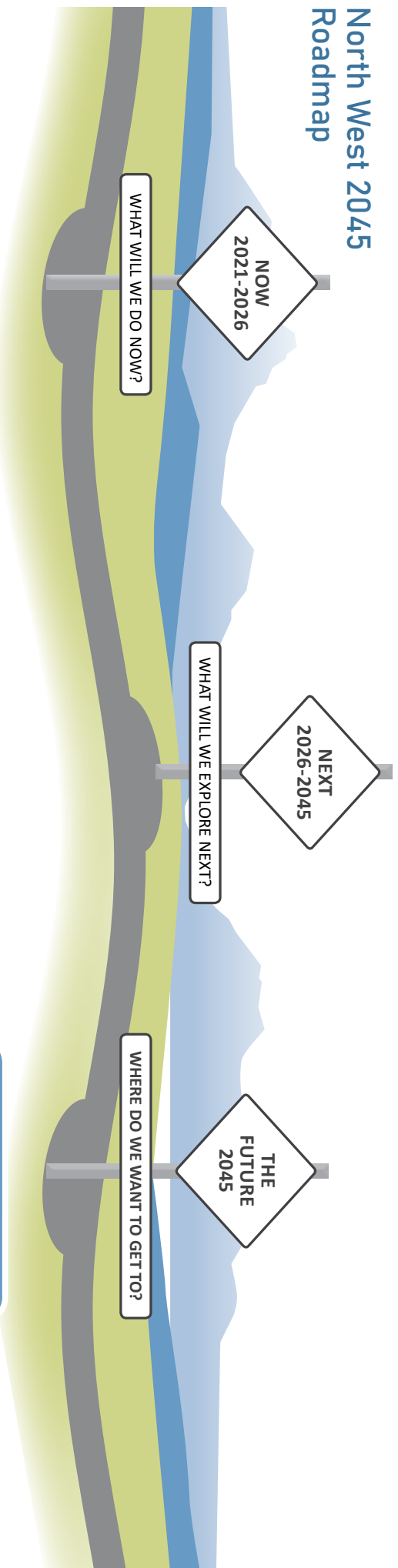
- ▶ Working in partnership with Highland Council and HIE to develop Community Wealth Building opportunities through local procurement to stimulate investment in jobs, skills and produce.

### What can we build on or learn from?

The **Assynt Crofters' Trust** achieved Scotland's first community land purchase in 1993. The 9000Ha North Lochinver Estate was bought for £300000, enabling the ordinary people who live and work on the land to have some control over their own economic future. It was a breakthrough and inspired many further community purchases locally and nationally.

The **local governance review 2021** highlights that, compared to case studies in Germany, Denmark, Uruguay, New Zealand and England, Scotland is alone in not having regional and municipal level governance arrangements. Scotland's Local Authorities are serving at least 100,000 people: much larger than most municipalities in other places. The Localism Commission found that to strengthen community power, action is required across four pillars of localism: relationships; institutions; capacity; and powers.

# North West 2045 Roadmap



1. Develop affordable local housing solutions
2. Explore local infrastructure and broadband solutions

- ▶ Affordable, sustainable housing
- ▶ Modern infrastructure and services
- ▶ Quality education across the area

A place that is attractive for young people and families to live and work

- POLICY OPPORTUNITIES**
- SG Population Strategy 2021 and Repopulation Zones tackle depopulation challenges
  - Scottish National Investment Bank investing in people and place

3. Develop the case for multi-use rural hubs
4. Scope a local food strategy for our place

- ▶ Investing in renewables for local benefit
- ▶ Natural capital investment in land and sea
- ▶ Traditional livelihoods and industries renewed
- ▶ Attracting and seeding new business

A model for a new diverse rural economy

- POLICY OPPORTUNITIES**
- Green Recovery and Just Transition support for local economies
  - National Development Plan for Crofting seeds change

5. Develop new approaches to land management, including through a RLUP pilot
6. Invest in community resilience and voice

- ▶ Community Wealth Building to stimulate local investment
- ▶ Strong local democracy and voice
- ▶ Communities influence land management locally
- ▶ Rich community life and activities

A place where communities have the ability to determine their own prospects

- POLICY OPPORTUNITIES**
- Roll out of Local Place Planning and NPfA
  - Learning from Local Governance Review implemented
  - 3rd Land Use Strategy promotes dialogue between stakeholders



IMAGE © EWEN MACLACHLAN

# Next steps

## Ath-cheumannan

We plan to build strong foundations over the next 5 years, with support from key partners, from which we can evolve strategies and plans to meet our long-term aims to 2045.

### Now: Short term 2021-26

- ▶ Build the basis of a strong collective approach and community capacity to lead and deliver plans and key developments.
- ▶ Strengthen our understanding of the key opportunities for development and challenges on the horizon and the best ways to meet these, by learning from our peers within the community and examples elsewhere in Scotland and beyond.
- ▶ Develop a partnership approach with decisionmakers in local and national government, private industry and key agencies to inform and explore place-based solutions and opportunities for development in the area.

The NorthWest2045 partners are committed to continue our work together and to look for ways to embed the community vision in our own organisational and collective practice. To realise the potential of our work so far, we are seeking support to sustain our momentum. We want to maintain the positive community dialogue that we have

established; invest in community capacity to continue to lead and evolve the NorthWest2045 work, to learn from others, and to keep developing local partnerships to focus on particular pertinent issues.

### Next: Medium – Long Term 2026-2045

The foundations we build in the short term through these identified actions will allow us to continue to evolve our vision and take advantage of opportunities as they emerge over the coming decades – such as the developing markets for natural capital, ecosystem services and renewables, strategies to repopulate rural areas and new approaches to localising democracy. Together, our actions will reverse the degenerative cycle that is threatening to erode our communities, and initiate a regenerative cycle which will enhance the lives of our communities and benefit the precious land we live in.

**“I would hope we’ll be seen... for the wonderful, resilient, caring communities we are, that they invest in us...to help us create more vibrant sustainable communities that people will want to come and live in...a place where people will live, work and thrive.”**

*25-39, Coigach and Assynt*

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- xvi Op. cit. Scottish Government (2010).
- xvii **Democracy:** <https://boundaries.scot/2019-reviews-electoral-arrangements> "Determining councillor numbers" section, third para down in each report refers to the target for that area.

## Further details

To find out more about the work of the NorthWest2045 project and to read a longer version of the community vision, visit [www.northwest2045.scot](http://www.northwest2045.scot)

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