

Winning Cromarty green freeport could stem tide of Highlands population decline

By Simon Warburton

January 13, 2023, 10:30 pm



Winners: Members of the OCF consortium celebrate green freeport status: Image Sandy McCook.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak says he “completely believes” awarding green freeport status to the Opportunity Cromarty Firth (OCF) consortium will entice young people to stay in the region and address the thorny question of depopulation in the Highlands.

A recent survey showed nearly half of all young people in the Highlands and Islands plan to move away from the area in the next five years, but the fact OCF managed to scoop one of the two green freeport prizes along with Forth Ports could provide a much-needed fillip to make them think again.

In concrete terms the newly-won status will see both bids land a share of the £52 million pot of government funding alongside a package of tax and customs allowances, as well as investment

incentives for areas around airports, seaports and rail terminals.



Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was in Cromarty Firth as the green freeport awards were unveiled.
Image: Shutterstock.

In its bid, submitted in June, the OCF consortium said winning the status for Inverness and the Cromarty Firth would be key to attracting at least £2.5 billion of new private sector investment, creating 25,000 jobs and ensuring local content targets for offshore windfarm developments are met, rather than the work going abroad.

After arriving in a blizzard of flashing blue lights and police outriders to the Cromarty Firth Port Authority offices, Mr Sunak told the Press and Journal: “It is really inspiring to see how everyone has reacted to this morning (announcement).

“We were talking to some young people who have finished their training course, they are already out working and are all so pumped up because of what it (freeport) is going to mean for them, colleagues, friends, neighbours.

‘Levelling up – that’s what freeports do’

“That will feed over the months, years, everyone will see the momentum this has created. We don’t want our young people to leave home to fulfil all their dreams and ambitions.

“That is why if we can bring the investment and jobs and opportunity to them, that is what levelling up should be about and that’s what freeports do.”

The Prime Minister stressed the importance of the UK and Scottish governments collaborating on the issue – a delicate subject certain to have been raised at last night’s one-on-one dinner between Mr Sunak and First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon in Inverness.



Global Energy Group boss and Ross County chairman Roy MacGregor of Global Energy said ‘we were all Highlanders together’ in pulling together the bid for a green freeport. Image: Sandy McCook/DC Thomson

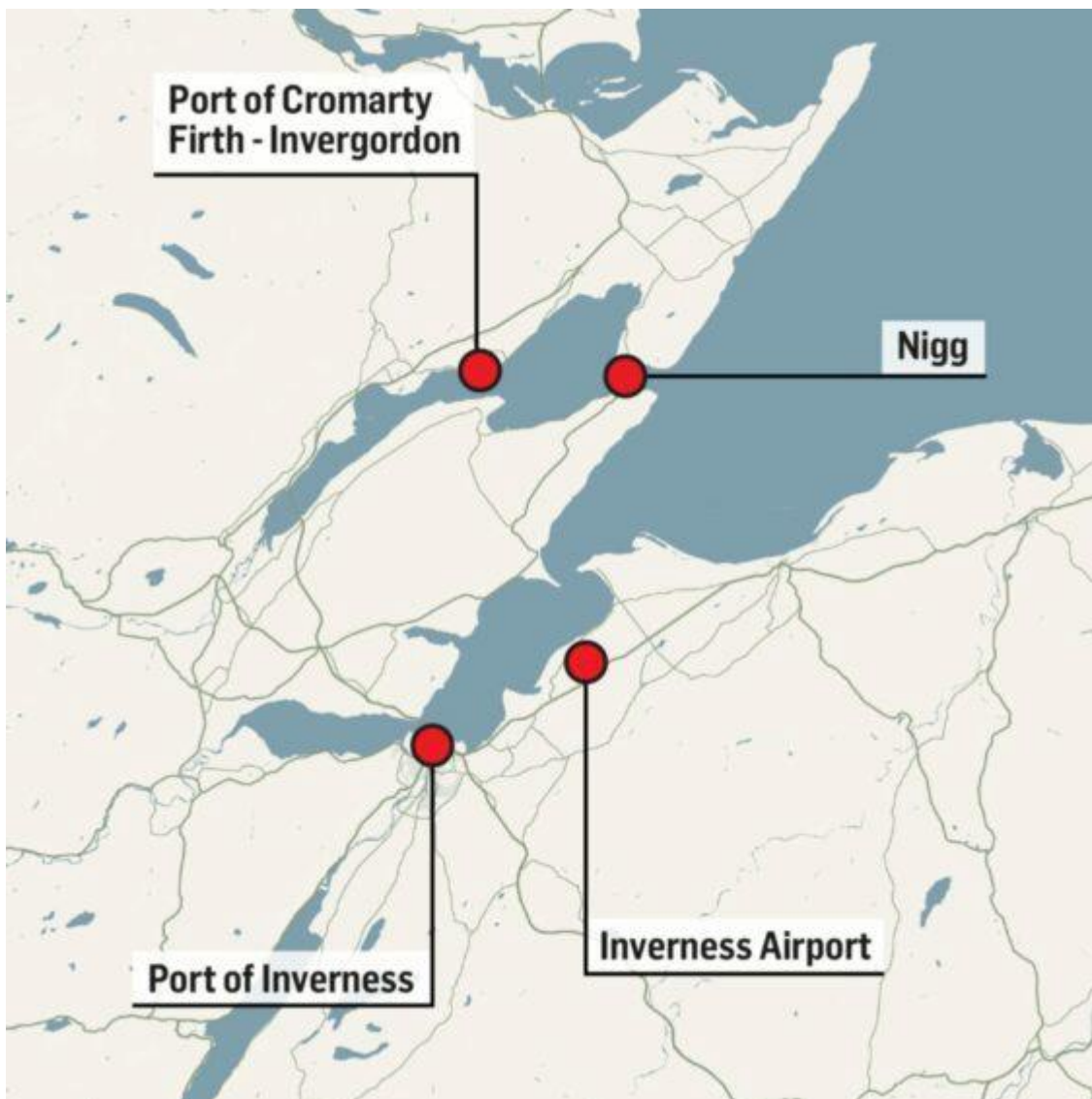
Depopulation has plagued the Highlands for many years and has its origins in multiple reasons, such as lack of affordable housing, Brexit and a dearth of well-paid jobs, but there are also issues specific to the region such as access to health services and digital connectivity, as well as an overreliance on fossil fuels and cars.

Highland entrepreneur and Ross County chairman Roy MacGregor, whose business empire now

includes Inverness-based investment group, GEG Capital, said: “As a Highland boy I am really proud we got there.

“We were all Highlanders together”

“The Prime Minister could have gone to Edinburgh but he came here. Not only were we the best bid, but the levelling up agenda is important to him. He saw the partnership here between public and private sector that has made this happen – we were all Highlanders together.”



Map of Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport. Image: Clarke Cooper/ DC Thomson.

Highland Council leader Raymond Bremner also addressed the depopulation issue saying: “This incredible opportunity will assist us in addressing the local and national transition to net zero, help to create sustainable high-quality jobs in a green economy, while regenerating and strengthening

communities and reversing depopulation.”

Hefty opposition from other bidders

OCF was up against some hefty competitors in the shape of North East Scotland Green Freeport, a joint application from Aberdeen and Peterhead, Orkney Green Freeport, Forth Green Freeport and Clyde Green Freeport.

The OCF bid comprised 30-plus backers including heavyweights such as GEG and a host of regional businesses such as Inverness Airport, the Port of Inverness and Loganair, as well as public sector organisations and academic bodies.



Cromarty Firth will gain green freeport status. Image: Ewan Boothman.

Speaking on behalf of OCF and as Port of Cromarty Firth chief executive, Bob Buskie said it was a “lot of relief” to pass the winning post and added the job creation had to be thought of it in the long-term with a sales pipeline stretching 50 years into the future.

Amid the celebrations however, was a note of caution struck by Greens finance spokesman Ross Greer MSP who said the status risked causing “significant damage to the environment.”

“There is nothing green about so-called green freeports,” he added.

Not even those gloomy words could dampen the upbeat mood in the Highlands however, with Port of Cromarty Firth (PoCF) strategic business development manager Joanne Allday noting the winning team’s success was “everybody’s bid, everybody’s win” adding: “tonight, we should all be celebrating.”

Ms Allday was a key driver in persuading London and Holyrood of the Highlands’ suitability for green freeport status and recounted a story echoing the Prime Minister’s earlier comments about how the bid could help to reduce depopulation.

She said: “Through the bid I was told the story by someone in the Outer Hebrides; he said his son left to go to university in the central belt and didn’t expect him to come back other than Christmas and birthdays.



Joanne Allday of the Cromarty Firth Port Authority who led the bid said the PM coming North to make the announcement ‘was beyond any of our wildest dreams’. Image: Sandy McCook/DC Thomson

“That is really tragic and if we can give them a reason to stay and a reason to settle and raise a family here, then this was all worth fighting for.”

Back to business next week

This weekend may well be one for cracking open a bottle of bubbly, but next week will see OCF back to the sober business of forming the governance structure needed to run the new freeport.

The board is aiming for a job description to be unveiled recruiting for the freeport’s managing director, with Ms Allday integrating the successful applicant into the consortium.

But tonight, the mood is certainly celebratory with a jubilant Ms Allday noting: “I honestly couldn’t have dreamed today would play out the way we thought.

“For the Prime Minister to come here to make the announcement and his first official visit to the Highlands, it is beyond any of our wildest dreams.”