



An initiative which aims to help small businesses across the Highlands and Islands grow by improving access to entrepreneurship and leadership training launched today after receiving government backing of up to £200,000.

Part of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills' (UKCES) UK Futures programme, the Catalyst project is led by Create, Inverness College UHI's Centre for Enterprise and Innovation, in partnership with Inverness Chamber of Commerce, Highlands and Islands Social Enterprise Zone (HiSEZ) and MAKAR.

The partners have found that for many remote and rural businesses poor transport infrastructure, limited accessibility and lack of time has led to low take-up of development opportunities in the fields of innovation, entrepreneurship and leadership.

By developing a new training programme in collaboration with six experienced Highlands and Islands-based entrepreneurs as well as producing and testing the value of online methods, Catalyst aims to reverse this trend and help Highlands and Islands businesses build the skills they need to drive increased productivity.

Speaking of the programme, **project leader and head of Create, Carol Langston**, said: "We're delighted to be leading this newly established partnership to boost the skills and productivity of our region's small businesses. Our experience of supporting small firms throughout the Highlands and Islands shows that take up of leadership and entrepreneurship training is low. We know too that poor transport on the periphery and island communities impacts on access to training.

"The new Catalyst programme works to address these challenges by improving accessibility by offering small businesses the choice of joining the programme via a face-to-face or virtual delivery method and targeting specific issues faced by business owners in a rural and often remote context. We are determined to create a programme that is relevant, focussed and enjoyable for the benefit of local industry and its leaders."

Brian Weaver, Chief Executive of HiSEZ said: "We are thrilled to be a key partner in the design and delivery of such an accessible training programme. I am particularly encouraged that delivery is across all

sectors, including social enterprise – and that those creating wealth and opportunity in the Highlands will have the opportunity to develop their businesses and selves. For over 10 years HiSEZ has offered Business Support to new and existing Social Enterprises throughout the Highlands and Islands and I now look forward to exploring how we extend our reach through face to face learning and virtual learning opportunities.”

Stewart Nicol, Chief Executive of the Inverness Chamber of Commerce said: “As the largest independent business organisation based in the Highlands, Inverness Chamber of Commerce is delighted to be part of this innovative partnership that supports the regions business leaders to become more successful and productive.

“Catalyst offers a unique opportunity to those in the Highlands and Islands and I am particularly proud to be part of the only partnership in Scotland to receive support from UKCES. It is exciting to see this initiative grow in the region and that we can ensure it responds to our rural and dispersed infrastructure. It promises to be a vital course, allowing those that may find such opportunities difficult to access, a wonderful chance to engage. I look forward to seeing the impact.”

Neil Sutherland, CEO at local business MAKAR said: “At Makar we have a strong commitment to creativity, quality and workmanship. By providing entrepreneurial support to the Catalyst programme I hope that I can share these values across the learning experience. I personally take great joy in ensuring that the next generation is given wide ranging opportunities to train and develop new skills. I look forward to seeing Catalyst support this aim and ambition.”

Julie Kenny CBE DL, Commissioner at UKCES, said: “Small businesses form the backbone of the UK economy. Yet constraints on their time and resources mean they are the least likely to develop the leadership and management skills that will help them grow.

“Owner managers and senior leaders of small companies need to spend their time and money wisely, and see clear benefits from the start. Current training programmes are often too broad or vague to be usefully applied in the real world. Simply gaining access to good programmes can also be difficult - for instance if you operate in a more rural area.

“We need new ways to reach these businesses, and we need solutions that are relevant to each small firm. The anchor institutions we will be working with have demonstrated a strong understanding of the specific issues that small businesses face in their local community. They have also shown that they have the ability to reach out to businesses who often find themselves excluded from national programmes.”

The project is one of just eight (and the only in Scotland) to have been selected as part of the UK Futures Programme, run by UKCES. Each is trialing innovative ways to improve the productivity of small businesses in their local community by building leadership and entrepreneurship skills. In particular the projects will identify new ways to help small businesses who haven't previously had any leadership or entrepreneurial training.

Each anchor institution has a strong local presence and commitment to their community. The institutions UKCES will be working with include Chambers of Commerce, Universities, Colleges, Councils, Enterprise Agencies and Business Schools, in conjunction with local employers.

Each project represents a joint investment with UKCES, with organisations investing support in cash, in-kind, or both, alongside a maximum government contribution of £200,000 per project. The total government contribution is £1.3 million.

For more information visit www.gov.uk/ukces or email enquiries.futuresprogramme@ukces.org.uk.
For more information about the Catalyst Programme or Inverness College UHI, please visit www.inverness.uhi.ac.uk or email carol.langston.ic@uhi.ac.uk.