

*This comment piece by XpoNorth director, Amanda Millen, appeared in The Herald newspaper on Monday 9th November 2015*

[http://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/13953205.Developing\\_creative\\_talent\\_in\\_the\\_Highlands\\_and\\_Islands/](http://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/13953205.Developing_creative_talent_in_the_Highlands_and_Islands/)

ANNIVERSARIES come and go, but last week saw a significant milestone for the Highlands and Islands. This vast area spans some 15,000 square miles – more than half of Scotland. It is home to some 448,000 of Scotland's 5.2m strong population.

The creation of the Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB) on 1st November 1965 happened several years before I was born (prematurely in Raigmore in Inverness before mum and I returned to the croft in Inverroy near Fort William a few weeks later.)

The organisation's aim back in 1965 was clear; to help breathe life back into communities that had witnessed a downward spiral of depopulation.

From its humble beginnings with just six employees, HIDB worked doggedly with partner organisations to invest in businesses, industry sectors, skills and infrastructure.

This approach has since enabled the region to make the most of opportunities in a host of business sectors, including; energy, food and drink, tourism, life sciences, business services and the creative industries.

Creativity is part of who we are in the Highlands and Islands. For creative people living in the region who wish to pursue their own chosen path and make a living; be it in the screen and broadcast sector, craft or fashion, the music industry or writing and publishing, there has never been a better time to harvest the opportunities which are there to be pursued.

Take the BAFTA award-winning CBeebies series, Katie Morag, based on the books by Highland author, Mairi Hedderwick. Originated by Cromarty-based indie, Move on Up, the series was made entirely in the Highlands using local talent – particularly in Lewis, where a set was built to accommodate the production.

Supported by XpoNorth, Katie Morag even offered two budding screenwriters, Jan Storie from Plockton and Louise Wyllie from Boat of Garten, the opportunity to work with the development team resulting in an all-important credit on two episodes. Both had been mentored through the XpoNorth network, which offers guidance, practical hands-on advice and networking opportunities in the screen, broadcast and digital sector throughout the region.

It's the small things which all add up to create a bigger picture.

According to Lindy Cameron of Move On Up, 62% of the budget was left behind in the region; i.e. it was used and consumed in the Highlands and Islands, so the HIE investment increased by more than tenfold.

The support offered by the XpoNorth creative industries network, which is funded by HIE and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), is behind many of the creative success stories in the Highlands and Islands.

The jewel in the crown of XpoNorth is a two-day long festival held every June in Inverness which last year attracted more than 1400 delegates and key international decision makers in the fields of screen, broadcast, craft, fashion, writing, publishing and music.

At this year's festival, the short film showcase attracted an unprecedented number of submissions at just under 3,000 from home and around the globe. There were 104 films screened, including a short shot on a GoPro in the waters around Orkney by local filmmaker, Mark Jenkins.

The all-important evening music showcases, which allow emerging talent to be seen and heard by all the right eyes and ears, saw applications continue to grow. For 64 slots, we sifted through over 2,000 applications and delegates were treated to sets from the likes of Scottish Album of the Year winner, Kathryn Joseph (before she won the accolade) and up-and-coming Inverness band, Spring Break.

Next year, we will be offering free placements to anyone interested in working on our live XpoNorth TV station. In addition, we're planning a host of workshops and hands-on training aimed at under 25s in digital media, lyric and song writing, as well as photography. This will run alongside our 30 industry conference panels, film and music showcasing, receptions, parties and networking. AND we are introducing a brand new writing showcase segment to the programme.

The hard work we do in promoting and supporting creative careers is a year-long commitment. Just last week we launched a new creative cluster called Northport Studio in Elgin as part of Moray Business Week. On Friday, I did a recce in my old school, Lochaber High in Fort William tomorrow for a Gaming Playground and Hands-On Camera Workshop we're running there as part of Lochaber Ideas Week.

We're also holding six networking sessions over the coming fortnight to promote two animation training programmes we're running with King Rollo Films in Skye in December and January, not to mention formulating our offering for next year's Festival of Architecture – XpoNorth is looking after as the delivery of this exciting festival in the Highlands.

To top the week off, we're at the BAFTA Scotland awards next Sunday keeping our fingers crossed for various Highland success stories – including Katie Morag.

XpoNorth may be known to many as a two-day festival in June but the hard work continues throughout the year!

*Amanda Millen is the Director of XpoNorth and XpoNorth Screen and Broadcast Industry Network, delivered by ScreenHI. The next edition of the XpoNorth festival takes place in Inverness on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> June 2016.*

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