

# Visioning Group

Young people as industry disruptors



Highlands and Islands Enterprise  
Iomairt na Gàidhealtachd 's nan Eilean

Summary	p.1
Introduction	p.2
Background and economics of Creative Economy	p.4
Highlands and Islands Enterprise	p.6
Visioning exercise	p.8
Visioning group participants	p.10
Meeting Summaries	p.14
Next steps	p.26

## SUMMARY

This report captures the discussions and outcomes of the **Visioning Group**, a collaborative initiative aimed at shaping the future of creative industries and career opportunities for young people in the Highlands and Islands. The Visioning Group brings together key stakeholders from education, business, and cultural sectors to explore challenges, identify opportunities, and develop strategic solutions to support sustainable growth in the region's creative economy.

Over the course of several meetings, participants examined key themes including **career pathways and accessibility, digital skills and AI, networking and mentorship, industry engagement, and the intersection of heritage, technology, and sustainability**. A major concern raised was that **young people struggle to access the networks, resources, and training necessary to build careers in creative industries**. Many feel that **opportunities are concentrated elsewhere**, making it difficult to envision a sustainable creative career within the region. Additionally, the **perceived value of creative industries remains lower than other sectors**, leading to limited career guidance and fewer structured pathways into the field. Another key challenge identified was **the lack of infrastructure to support creative entrepreneurship**, particularly in terms of digital connectivity, business development support, and industry engagement.

Despite these challenges, the region possesses **unique strengths that can be harnessed for long-term growth**. The Highlands and Islands have a rich cultural heritage and an increasing global demand for **authentic storytelling, digital heritage experiences, and sustainable creative enterprises**. The discussions emphasized the potential for **AI-driven heritage projects, innovative digital storytelling, and sustainable creative industries**, positioning the region as a **leader in blending technology with culture**. Additionally, the **region's strengths in renewable energy could be leveraged to power AI and digital enterprises, creating a model for sustainable technological innovation**.

The Visioning Group identified **a range of actionable solutions** to address these challenges and unlock opportunities. These include:

- **Developing clear career pathways** in creative industries, ensuring young people have access to structured training, mentorship, and business skills development.
- **Enhancing digital and physical hubs** to provide co-living and co-working spaces, fostering a thriving creative ecosystem.
- **Expanding mentorship and networking opportunities**, ensuring young creatives can connect with industry professionals, access guidance, and establish professional relationships.
- **Integrating AI and emerging technologies** into creative education and business strategies, ensuring young people and enterprises can navigate digital transformation.
- **Supporting digital content creation and monetization**, equipping young people with the skills to successfully market and sustain creative businesses.
- **Strengthening regional coordination and industry partnerships**, ensuring a strategic approach to investment, collaboration, and innovation.
- **Exploring funding models and direct-to-consumer platforms** to increase access to global markets for local creatives.

By taking a **coordinated and proactive approach**, aligning efforts across **education, industry, and government**, the Highlands and Islands can **build a globally connected, resilient creative economy**. This strategy will provide **young people with meaningful career opportunities while enhancing the region's cultural and economic sustainability**.

It is important to state the report does not critique any of the valuable services carried out by other organisations or the approaches they take, rather, it is intended to identify approaches that might benefit the region, start conversations and encourage collaboration.

Perhaps one of the most exciting elements of this piece of work, was the enthusiasm and generosity of the participants involved which has made the report possible and offers so many potential future collaborations. A huge thank you to everyone involved.

## **INTRODUCTION:- Empowering Young Innovators to Disrupt and Transform**

### **Overview**

The digital landscape has rapidly evolved post-COVID-19, accelerating the shift to online, on-demand, and user-generated content. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram now dominate content consumption, presenting both challenges and opportunities for rural creative businesses in the Highlands and Islands. Young digital natives possess the skills to disrupt traditional business models, yet barriers such as limited industry networks, funding constraints, and talent migration hinder progress.

To address these challenges, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) convened a cross-sector Visioning Group, *Empowering Young Innovators to Disrupt and Transform*. This initiative brought together decision-makers and industry experts to explore ways young talent can drive innovation, enhance discovery and engagement, and create monetisation opportunities in rural creative industries.

## Key Challenges

- Limited access to creative networks, funding, and markets.
- Scale barriers and lack of specialist support.
- Export challenges and digital skills gaps.
- Young talent migrating to urban centres.

## Opportunities for Growth

- Cross-sector collaboration for larger-scale projects.
- Digital distribution and export market access for rural businesses.
- Strengthening pathways for young talent.
- Leveraging global networks for cutting-edge support and innovation.

## Sector Challenges

Traditional infrastructure limits small rural businesses, with high entry costs and risk aversion restricting access to media distribution networks. Many Scottish-quota productions are dominated by London-based companies, while broadcasters like STV and ITV increasingly produce content in-house. In music, success is now driven by direct fan engagement rather than traditional industry gatekeepers.

A rigid sub-sectoral approach further limits innovation, as rural creative businesses need flexibility across disciplines such as storytelling, digital content, and community engagement. Diversification and collaboration enhance resilience, add expertise, and create new market opportunities.

## Visioning Group Structure

HIE convened a group of decision-makers and subject experts from diverse backgrounds to explore new approaches for integrating young talent into the creative, cultural, and heritage sectors. Over three online sessions, discussions focused on:

- Challenges businesses face in engaging young people.
- Opportunities to integrate young talent's digital skills and creativity.
- Strategies to encourage young professionals to stay, live, and work in the Highlands and Islands.

## Outcomes & Next Steps

While the short-term initiative did not aim to develop a long-term strategy, it generated valuable insights and proposals for further exploration. Discussions emphasized innovation, cross-sector collaboration, and sustainable career pathways for young talent.

Acknowledging existing business support efforts, the group focused on identifying new models for product and market development rather than critiquing current initiatives. Participants also recognized that financial constraints necessitate reduced reliance on public sector grants.

By leveraging young innovators' fresh perspectives and digital expertise, the region can foster transformation, drive growth, and remain competitive in a digital-first economy. The final report will outline key discussion points and potential next steps for action and collaboration.

## BACKGROUND AND ECONOMICS OF THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

### Overview of the Creative Industries

The creative industries are a key growth sector for Scotland, contributing significantly to the economy, culture, and international reputation. Recognised as a priority in both the UK Industrial Strategy and the Scottish Government's Economic Strategy, the sector blends traditional crafts with advanced technology and is one of the fastest-growing global industries.

The Scottish Government defines the sector as encompassing 16 subsectors, alongside creative roles within non-creative businesses. Demand for creative skills is rising across various industries, as highlighted by XpoNorth, which identified increasing engagement from non-creative businesses seeking creative expertise.

### Key Statistics

- The **UK creative industries** contribute **£126 billion annually**, with exports of **£41.4 billion in 2022**, surpassing the combined total of food and drink, aerospace, and automotive. The sector employs **over 2.4 million people**.
- **Scotland's creative industries** generate **£4.6 billion in GVA annually**, employ **over 87,000 people**, and grew by **57% (£10.3 billion) from 2001 to 2021**.
- In the **Highlands and Islands**, the sector contributes **£740 million** to the local economy, employing **5,500 people (2018)**, with an additional **3,000 employees needed** to meet demand. Current HIE figures suggest that average sector wages now exceed those in financial services and food and drink.

### Geographic and Sectoral Characteristics

The Highlands and Islands account for half of Scotland's landmass but less than 10% of the population. The creative industries play a crucial role in regional employment, innovation, and economic growth. The sector is characterised by:

- A **high proportion of micro-businesses and freelancers** (72% of CI businesses in Scotland employ fewer than five people, with an even higher percentage in the Highlands and Islands).
- A **cross-disciplinary approach**, spanning traditional crafts, music, digital media, and content creation.
- A **culture of innovation** fostered by the region's dispersed geography, encouraging digital-first business models.
- Strong **heritage and provenance**, from **Harris Tweed and Shetland wool** to **traditional music and craft traditions**. Regional authenticity provides a competitive advantage in global markets.
- Whilst rural enterprises face challenges their contribution to rural economies cannot be ignored.

Creative businesses in remote areas can have an outsized impact on local communities. The **Creative Industries Team** defines the creative economy as: *“The people, enterprises, and communities that transform cultural skills, knowledge, and ideas into economically productive goods, services, and places.”*

### Collaboration and innovation

- Creative industries drive cross-sectoral innovation, with **70% of businesses collaborating with creative firms reporting increased innovation (NESTA)**.
- The region’s geographic dispersion necessitates **digital collaboration** and networking initiatives.
- Creative skills are increasingly in demand, with **83% of non-creative businesses recognising their value**, though **63% report difficulty in finding these skills (UKCIF, 2022)**.

### Business Growth and Market Potential

- The **global digital media market**, valued at **\$925 billion in 2024**, is projected to reach **\$1.9 trillion by 2030**.
- The **UK digital media revenue** is expected to be **\$22.72 billion in 2024**, driving further demand for creative content.
- The **global content creation market**, valued at **\$32.28 billion in 2024**, is projected to grow at **14% annually from 2025–2029**.
- Digital-first models enable small creative businesses to **sell digital products (e-books, online courses, virtual workshops) with minimal production costs**, making creative careers viable even in remote locations.

### Opportunities for Young People in the Creative Industries

- **30% of Scottish school pupils aspire to work in the creative sector**, making it the second most desired career path after healthcare (SDS, 2024).
- Young people possess **strong digital skills**, with **70% already proficient in various digital tools and platforms**.
- Nearly **3,000 young people leave the Highlands and Islands annually** for further education.
- **1.3 million (18%) of UK 18–26-year-olds either generate income or aspire to make a living from social media content creation** (Just Entrepreneurs).

### Challenges Facing the Sector in the Highlands and Islands

HIE’s XpoNorth Digital programme engaged with around 1500 unique businesses over the past 3 years. From this a clear picture of the challenges have emerged.

- Access to creative clusters, networks and funding remains limited for rural micro-businesses.
- Scale barriers hampering access to support. Lack of specialist support.
- Barriers to exporting and international market access.
- Digital skills gaps and talent retention hinder growth.

And support requirements:

- Specialised advice
- Finance, access to networks, market penetration, digital solutions, support in storytelling (authenticity and provenance), and identifying innovation opportunities.
- Improved pathways for young talent with digital skills
- Addressing AI-related opportunities and risks.

### **Sustainability and the Creative Economy**

- Creative businesses contribute to sustainability, with digital-first enterprises reducing physical infrastructure needs and **carbon emissions by up to 30% (DCMS)**.

### **Conclusion**

The creative industries are a vital and growing sector in the Highlands and Islands, driving economic growth, cultural heritage, and regional identity. With **strong interest from young people** and a **growing foundation in digital content creation**, the sector holds immense potential. Addressing challenges related to **funding, market access, and skills development** will be key to unlocking new opportunities.

By **leveraging digital-first strategies, fostering collaboration, and supporting young creatives**, the Highlands and Islands can position themselves as a leading hub for creative talent and innovation at both national and international levels.

### **HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS ENTERPRISE**

HIE's Creative Industries (CI) team, now part of the Innovation and Technology team, has focused on encouraging the "Creative Economy", *the people, places and businesses that transform cultural knowledge into commercially viable products and services*. The majority of specialised support has been delivered through the model of XpoNorth Digital. This extended team model allowed fast, flexible and tailored support which was nationally and internationally recognised for its innovation and value. There is no equivalent service in Scotland that the sector can be signposted to. XpoNorth was supported by its global network which included organisations as diverse as NASA, The Project Management Institute, Google and Playmobil. Creative UK research shows that 83% of UK businesses reported the need for creative skills, and 63% reported difficulty finding these skills. Post-COVID demand for XpoNorth support expanded to other sectors e.g. Sports, Health, Tourism, and Food and Drink requiring creative solutions.

A recent HIE report showed CI contributed over 50% of HIE's target for businesses delivering new products and services, and over 25% of innovation active businesses. Between April 23 and January 25, the team worked with around 120 enterprises in fragile areas and gave HIE an unrivalled reach into the sector.

The 1,500 unique businesses XpoNorth Digital supported gave a clear picture of what they of the challenges they faced and their support requirements for growth.

Challenges	Requirements	Future focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Access to creative clusters, networks and funding remains limited for rural micro-businesses.</li> <li>-Scale barriers hampering access to support. Lack of specialist support.</li> <li>-Barriers to exporting and international market access.</li> <li>-Digital skills gaps and talent retention hinder growth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Specialised advice</li> <li>--Finance, access to networks, market penetration, digital solutions, support in storytelling (authenticity and provenance), and identifying innovation opportunities.</li> <li>-Improved pathways for young talent with digital skills</li> <li>-addressing AI-related opportunities and risks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Foster cross-sector collaboration for larger-scale commercial projects.</li> <li>-Support rural creative businesses in accessing digital distribution and export markets.</li> <li>-Address digital skills gaps, including AI-related challenges.</li> <li>-Build stronger industry pathways for young talent.</li> <li>-Leverage global networks for cutting-edge support and innovation.</li> </ul>

### Future focus of the HIE's specialised support for the sector

Support should prioritise **direct-to-consumer (DTC) channels** and new intermediary platforms to unlock global markets and enable scalable solutions for digital and physical products. This approach reduces barriers, enhances market access and allows small businesses to grow incrementally by integrating additional digital services as needed. The proposed approach requires a focus on content/platforms and AI.

### Digital Content and Platforms

Digital content allows creators to bypass traditional intermediaries and reach global audiences. Key benefits are:

- **Cost-effective and affordable tools** like Canva and DaVinci Resolve empower small creators.
- **Shared resources** reduce financial burdens.
- **Platforms** like Etsy and Shopify support growth without physical storefronts.

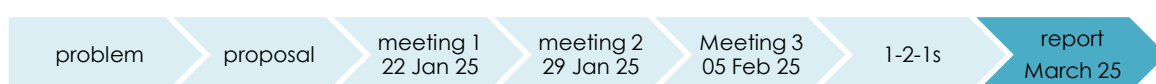
### Preparing for AI-Driven Innovation

Regional businesses are still unclear on the potential for AI integration – Narrow AI and Generative AI. The next frontier for rural creative businesses lies in preparing for Agentic AI which builds on current AI models but adds capabilities for independent decision-making and goal-oriented reasoning and will be available in the near future. Key impacts of AI for rural creative businesses include:



- **Expanded Market Access:** through tools for content creation, distribution, and audience engagement.
- **Creative Augmentation:** AI-assisted storytelling, design, and digital heritage preservation, enabling scalability while maintaining authenticity.
- **Operational Efficiency:** automating administrative tasks to free up time for creative work.
- **New Revenue Models:** AI platforms supporting dynamic pricing, personalised content recommendations and e-commerce strategies.
- **Cultural Sustainability:** through AI-assisted storytelling and design, digital archiving, interactive heritage experiences and the preservation of regional languages and traditions.

## VISIONING EXERCISE



PLAN		
<b>Project</b>		Empowering Young Innovators to Disrupt and Transform
<b>Skills</b>	Visioning group requirements.	Regional organisations working with young people. Creative Industries, Technology and digital platforms. Psychology. HR. Sustainability. Inclusion. Digital Story telling.
<b>Activity</b>	Meeting 1 Understanding the Landscape Wednesday 22nd January 2025, 1500-17.00	<p>2 Hours: participants will introduce themselves and gain an overview of the current creative and cultural landscape in the Highlands and Islands, complemented by a national perspective. To set a context for the discussion, there will be short presentations from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills Development Scotland: recent studies highlight that the majority of school pupils in Scotland wish to work in creative industries, health, and engineering</li> <li>• Highlands and Islands Enterprise: regional challenges, current infrastructure, and population change.</li> </ul> <p>Explore the challenges and opportunities young people face when looking to enter the creative sector regionally. Participants are encouraged to share perspectives drawn from their own experiences, including international contexts, to rethink traditional approaches.</p>
	Meeting 2 Overcoming Barriers and	2 Hours: Reflect on possibilities and ideas from session one.

	<p>Unlocking Potential Wednesday 29th January 2025, 1500-17.00</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The University of the Highlands and Islands: overview of what the university offers young people and its remit to address economic development in the region.</li> <li>• Project management Institute: overview of the challenges of encouraging young people into project management. Current opportunities.</li> </ul> <p>Building on the insights from Session 1, Session 2 will shift from exploration to actionable planning, focusing on strategic interventions that address the challenges and opportunities identified. Key Areas for Discussion and Action may include: 1. Enhancing Confidence and Preparedness Strategies to equip young people with the skills, resilience, and confidence required to navigate the evolving cultural workforce, including training opportunities, mentorship, and tools for self-directed career development. 2. Unlocking the Value of Young Talent How businesses and organisations in the sector can be encouraged to see young talent as key drivers of growth and innovation. Strategies to make the hiring and nurturing of young professionals more attractive and feasible for businesses. 3. Pathways for Retention of Talent and Long-term Growth Identify how targeted investment in young people can create clear career pathways that incentivise staying within the region, including innovative models for apprenticeships, entrepreneurial support and creating regional clusters. 4. Global Perspectives, Local Impact How global best practices can be adapted, integrating scalable ideas that combine local cultural richness with global trends in technology, creative entrepreneurship, and workforce development.</p>
	<p>Meeting 3 Turning Insights Into Action Wednesday 5th February 2025, 1500-17.00</p>	<p>2 Hours: In this concluding session, participants will consider how the ideas discussed can be transformed into manageable actionable activity. The session will begin with a recap of key themes, prioritise recommendations and ensure a cohesive set of strategies for the final report. These deliverables will aim to drive meaningful change across the Highlands and Islands, benefiting young people, businesses and communities alike. By the end of this session, it is hoped that participants will have co-developed a set of actionable, forward-thinking recommendations designed to encourage sustainable growth, retain young talent, and establish the region as a highly innovative contributor to the creative and cultural industries. These recommendations will form the cornerstone of the final report, providing a roadmap for transformative change that is both visionary and achievable.</p>

	1-2-1 clear up	Discussion with anyone who missed a meeting, answer specific additional questions.
<b>Output</b>	Final report	Draft to group, amend and prepare for distribution
	Distribution list	
	Assess process / lessons learned	Assess and amend process. New visioning exercise planning
	Development / delivery Team	Jeni Oliver, Jessica Fox, Alex Smith, Iain Hamilton

## VISIONING GROUP PARTICIPANTS

### **Alison Wilson: Director of Economic Development and Advancement, University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI)**

Alison is the Director of Economic Development and Advancement at UHI, where she spearheads initiatives that foster collaboration, create economic development, and enhance philanthropic opportunities while strengthening UHI's external presence. She works strategically with industry, government, and public sector organisations to reinforce UHI's role as an anchor institution in the region, facilitating innovative partnerships, enterprise initiatives, and income generation. Alison leads UHI's involvement in key regional growth initiatives, including the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport and investments in renewable infrastructure. With over 25 years of experience in economic development, she has held significant roles in skills, telecommunications, and leadership within HIE, including financial and business services, inward investment, and business engagement. Alison currently serves as a Director of New Start Highland, a Trustee of the Port of Inverness, and as Highland Chair of the Institute of Directors. A passionate advocate for the North of Scotland, she has led numerous initiatives to promote the region on both national and international platforms. Alison has since joined Freeport.

### **Anthony Standing: Head of Region, North, Skills Development Scotland (SDS)**

Anthony Standing is Head of Region, North, at Skills Development Scotland (SDS). With over 1,400 colleagues working across Scotland in schools, career centres, and partner locations, SDS is dedicated to skills development and its vital role in building a modern, innovative, and prosperous Scottish economy. Committed to fostering fair work practices and a diverse workforce, they collaborate closely with partners to ensure employers have the right skills at the right time in high-performing, equitable workplaces. They also work to empower every individual with the skills and confidence needed to secure employment, advance in their careers, and reach their full potential. Their support for employers includes tailored skills advice and funding for workforce development.

**Annie Stone: Publishing Business Development Consultant. Specialties: Sales & Business Development | Acquisitions & Content Strategy**

Annie Stone splits her time between consulting on new product development for BookBub, teaching at NYU's Masters in Publishing program, and building a new content packaging company she co-founded with a colleague and friend in 2024. Her previous experience spans many areas of the publishing industry: most recently she worked in acquisitions at audiobook publisher Podium Entertainment, and before that headed up content acquisitions and licensing for Yonder, a serial fiction platform launched by Webtoon. She's also spent time as the head of business development at BookBub and began her career as an editor of children's books and young adult novels at Alloy Entertainment, Harlequin, and HarperCollins.

**Dr. David R. Cunningham CPsychol. –Chartered Counselling Psychologist, Musician, Producer, and Educator.**

David Cunningham's career bridges music and psychology. With over 40 years in the Scottish music industry, he has performed globally with his Scottish Dance Band and contributed to more than 11 commercial albums. As a producer and recording engineer, David has worked as a service provider for BBC Scotland programs such as Pipeline and Take the Floor and has taught traditional music workshops worldwide. As Clinical Director of Counselling Psychology Scotland, David oversees the delivery of high-quality psychological care. His research has explored the cognitive benefits of Scottish Country Dancing in delaying dementia and the therapeutic role of music in fostering emotional healing. He has experience working in NHS primary care and third sector organisations supporting young people in schools, researching identity formation in adolescence, and providing affirmative care for the LGBTQ+ community. David's diverse career, rooted in creativity and compassion, reflects his dedication to improving lives—whether through the power of music, the transformative potential of therapy, or the promotion of a more inclusive and equitable society.

**Elena Corchero: Director of Emerging Tech, Dow Jones Live**

Elena is a multi-award-winning visionary and thought leader with over 15 years at the forefront of technology, creating purpose-driven products, experiences, and innovation strategies for global brands. Proven inspirational leader in managing interdisciplinary and cross-functional teams in fast-paced environments, driving business growth and fostering a culture of innovation. Passionate about customer success, with expertise in market research and user experience design, blending physical and digital prototyping to engage stakeholders and transform ambiguity into tangible and impactful narratives. Elena is a former MIT Media Lab Europe Research Associate with a Master's in Material Futures from Central Saint Martins in London. A leading expert in smart materials and wearable technology, her work bridges science and everyday products, promoting local manufacturing, environmental responsibility, and gender equality in tech. She has received numerous awards, including recognition as the UK's top 3 women in tech innovators and a "Pitch@Palace" accolade. Elena has worked with high-profile clients like the London Olympics, BBC and Hugo Boss- and speaks internationally at prestigious venues, including TEDx along with a host of global industry events.

**Jonathan Tait: Rights Manager, STV Group, IP Specialist**

Jonathan is currently the Rights Manager for STV, the largest broadcaster in Scotland where he looks after acquisitions and rights for the STV Player. Before this, he spent nearly 20 years in the music industry working in A&R, artist management, tour management, as a rehearsal and studio

owner and then latterly in music education before re-training as an IP and entertainment lawyer in 2016. Jonathan is also a consultant who advises artists new and established and music industry professionals right across the whole industry, is a Director for the Scottish Music Industry Association and the Academy of Music & Sound.

**Manny Gill: Partner Success Manager, Project Management Institute (PMI)**

Prior to joining PMI in 2022, Manny was Business Development Manager for BCAS Biomedical Services, and Central Operations Manager for Greenbrook Healthcare.

**Katharina Abraham: Enterprise Account Manager, Hive Streaming/ former Client Manager & Partnerships- Market and Data Analysis, TikTok and Patreon**

Kat has had a career that can only be described as "on brand," embodying the spirit of living nearly nine lives. She began in aviation as a co-pilot, a role she held for five years before transitioning into media planning for renowned entertainment houses such as Warner Bros. and Disney. From there, Kat moved into music management, and for the past four years, she has focused on the tech industry, specialising in supporting artists and creators in building their online presence through platforms like Patreon and TikTok.

**Kathleen O'Neill: Director, Culture, Heritage & Arts Assembly, Argyll & Isles (CHARTS)**

Kathleen's career has focused on fostering collaboration, relationship-building, and fundraising to advance social inclusion in the arts. In the late 1980s, she founded Project Ability, an international arts agency supporting vulnerable communities, contributing to Glasgow's City of Culture bid. In the 1990s, she consulted for Glasgow Museums, designing Art Machine '95, a project recognised for excellence in European museum education. Later, as Cultural Planner for Clackmannanshire Council, Kathleen led cultural regeneration initiatives rooted in local heritage. Recently, Kathleen has helped establish two sector-led arts charities, including Dumfries and Galloway Chamber of the Arts and CHARTS (Culture, Heritage and Arts Assembly, Argyll and Isles), where she serves as Director. An artist herself, Kathleen holds a fine arts degree and an MSc in Environment, Heritage and Policy.

**Michael Rueger: Creative Director, Innovation, Playmobil International**

Michael is the Creative Director of Innovation at Playmobil International. Previously, he served as Creative Director at Ravensburger Innovation Lab and spent many years as a freelance Creative Director and Producer, collaborating with top advertising agencies, theme parks and toy companies. Throughout his diverse career, Michael has earned numerous prestigious international awards, including the Toy Innovation Award in 2010 for tiptoi®. Known for his boundless curiosity and outside-the-box thinking, Michael is a true creative explorer.

**Nelly Wilson: AI Transformation Manager at Google**

Nelly Wilson is an emerging leader at Google. Leading engineering delivery teams, she designs and implements data and AI solutions at Google Cloud. Bringing her voice to conversations that not only shape the present but also create the future, Nelly is consistently sought out for her thought leadership. Her work across multiple industries has been recognised with various awards, including Google Cloud Club, of which she is the youngest-ever recipient.

### **Neil Holmes: Senior Technical Manager at Microsoft**

With over 34 years in the games industry, Neil Holmes, Senior Technical Manager at Microsoft, has worked on hundreds of titles across console, PC and Mobile. In his current role as a Senior Technical Partner Manager at Xbox Games Studios he provides technical support and expertise to Rare, Mojang and Machine Games.

### **Paloma Varon: Sustainable Development Project Manager, Journalist**

Paloma Varon is a Brazilian Italian journalist and political scientist with over 15 years of experience. She holds a master's degree in marketing from IAE Paris - Sorbonne Business School and currently, she is pursuing a Master's in Organizations and Transitions for Sustainable Development at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, also in Paris. As a content creator for various media, she is passionate about communication, consulting, international relations, social networks, and digital strategy. She worked for UNESCO and many other international organisations.

**Sandra McCaughey: DYW (Developing the Young Workforce) Employer Engagement Manager**  
Developing the Young Workforce Inverness & Central Highland was established in 2016 as part of the Scottish Government's youth employment strategy. Hosted by Inverness Chamber of Commerce and with an employer-led Board, our aim is to develop sustainable links between schools, colleges and employers to help employers be more engaged in shaping their future workforce and better prepare young people for the world of work.

### **Sarah Durkin: Senior HR Manager, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE)**

Sarah currently works as a Senior HR Manager with Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Throughout her 15 year HR career, Sarah has worked for both public and private sector companies with experience in the police as well as the oil and gas industry across the whole HR remit. Sarah is passionate about working in partnership with operational leaders to support the organisation in achieving its strategic objectives and has taken a lead role in significant change management projects throughout the course of her career. Sarah's current focus is on staff development and is dedicated to upskilling existing and aspiring managers in people management skills to build organisational confidence and encourage a results-led, strengths-based approach to people.

### **Sharon McIntyre: Chief Executive Officer, MCR Pathways**

Sharon joined MCR Pathways from her role as Head of Career Education Information, Advice and Guidance Operations at Skills Development Scotland. Her portfolio remit for the national operational delivery of CEIAG within all secondary schools, cities and community venues across Scotland, ensuring CIAG Services deliver against strategic Scottish Government policy priorities and SDS Corporate Goals and moreover for people, of all ages, in Scotland. Sharon has also previously held roles of Director of Operations for Changeworks, Strategic Leader for Tenant Services at Wheatley Housing Group and Child Poverty UK Government Advisor for Yorkshire and The Humber Region. Sharon brings a wealth of experience leading high performing, multi-disciplinary teams across education, learning, social care, housing and environmental sectors.

### **Development and delivery team**

**Iain Hamilton**, Head of Creative Industries, HIE

**Jeni Oliver**, Senior Development Manager, HIE

Jessica Fox, Co-founder, LDL

Alex Smith, Co-Founder, LDL

## MEETING SUMMARIES

Meeting 1: Visioning exercise notes 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2025.

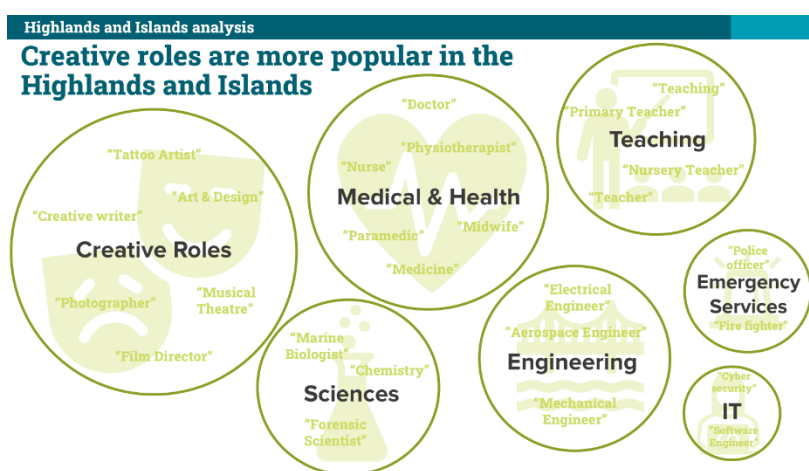
### Presentations

#### Morven Fancey, HIE – Overview of the region, population, sectors, etc.

- An aging population in the region, and loss of young people from the region including over 2,000 leaving each year for further and higher education creative courses.
- Challenges over housing and fragile areas.
- Opportunities in renewables, focus on place and sustainability
- New growth areas such as space
- Creative industries and culture

#### Anthony Standing, Skills Development Scotland – SDS and the research on career preferences.

- School pupils in Scotland identified what they would like to take up as a future career. Health was top, Creative Industries second and engineering third. It showed architecture as a separate category, which is in fact part of Creative Industries, so would rise the figures slightly further. In the Highlands and Islands, the highest response was for Creative Industries.
- Many young people do want to remain or return to the region with many expressing a desire to do something for the Highlands and Islands. Anecdotally we are seeing a growth in young people who see the region as very much a part of their identity.
- This is backed up by additional research carried out by SDS and others and shows that there are already high numbers of young people engaging in digital content creation.



#### Manny Gill, Project Management Institute – Project management and young people.

- Many other sectors require more staff with digital and creative skills.



- Across creative industries and project management in general there is still an issue around careers guidance and identifying pathways into the sector, and there is still a lack of understanding how the various parts of the creative sector work e.g. infrastructure, types of work, how to develop ideas.

### **Specific challenges and opportunities**

It was highlighted that there are some very specific challenges in the region. Covering an area the size of Belgium, with a low population and complex geography creates challenges around physical hubs and clusters. It also makes delivering support face to face challenging as Argyll alone would need at least two or three physical hubs because of the geography.

Inclusivity remains critical, considering young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with disabilities, and individuals with neurodiverse needs. Post-COVID confidence and anxiety issues exacerbate these challenges in a region with high self-employment rates.

The need to provide inspiration for young people to help them see and understand what is possible while located in the region was highlighted. This required young people constantly being in an atmosphere of opportunity. Whilst the geographic challenges are clear, it would be valuable to create programmes and spaces where activity is happening that would inspire and highlight opportunities.

Young people should be encouraged to connect and network with peers and others, whether virtually or physically, bringing communities of people together by their interests. There are increasing numbers of platforms to encourage greater connectivity between young people themselves.

The similarities (in terms of location and population size) between the Highlands and Islands and the Canary Islands were raised, and the impact of their support for Digital Nomads and the impact this has had was emphasised. People locate there because of lifestyle, very often kite surfers for example. Lifestyle would be a consideration in attracting people to the region, particularly around natural assets, culture and heritage etc.

Digital nomad schemes offering 3 month tasters and potentially exchanging with areas such as the Canary Islands could be one approach. This would require several layers of support:

- housing – co-living/working space,
- being able to offer what an urban centre might offer, albeit in different forms.
- Clearly identifying what can only be done from the Highlands and Islands.

There is an opportunity to bring together the energy demands of AI and the renewables/green energy opportunities in the region.

Heritage continues to offer opportunities for the region. Heritage again is a distinctive element of the Highlands and Islands and offers a wealth of stories. Straightforward searches online for terms relating to the region, very often provide returns for content that is not actually made in the region, links can be tenuous. If we want people to engage with the region, it is essential to provide engagement points. The partnership with Smartify has shown that there is a demand but there are definite skills challenges in museums for example, that young people could resolve as digital service providers/content creators which would keep more of the supply chain in the region.



Digital story telling offers a service required across all sectors.

There is notable lack of business focussing on games. This is an area not addressed by UHI, and games do offer significant opportunity for development whether developing actual games or using the technology and skills to look at wider story telling.

Digital solutions offer a range of new engagement points that can be monetised and offer alternative approaches to reaching markets, allowing options around the relationship with traditional commissioners and greater opportunity for innovation.

Support is still required to help small businesses have the time to look up and identify opportunities for innovation, which is necessary. Also support to young people to identify opportunities to turn the skills they already have and can develop further, into credible business services.

Work is required to look at how to give young people the ability and confidence to take the step to self-employment or applying for jobs, and for approaching the networks they will require. This should also look at developing resilience and not everything can be successful. Questions also arise around psychological identity and how young people see themselves. Approaching this means working with employers and other organisations as well as young people themselves.

Too many young people are still approaching commissioners and businesses with ideas, but lacking knowledge of the industry infrastructure and how the business works, and with pitches that are not close to being ready. Again, an area that could be addressed through HIE's pilot development challenge fund and work with organisations such as STV who do provide opportunities for this kind of guidance.

#### **Impact of AI and Technology on Communities and Businesses:**

The introduction of AI and other advanced technologies presents a significant challenge for communities and businesses in the region. These technologies allow for the creation of products and services based on local culture, natural assets, and other regional characteristics. However, such innovations often yield no direct economic returns for the area and remove control over how its culture is presented. This highlights the urgent need for better understanding of AI and related technologies among local communities and businesses.

Additionally, there is a clear gap in the education of young people as they are not being exposed to AI and its implications early enough. This educational deficit risks placing the region at a long-term disadvantage. Developing comprehensive programs to educate young people about AI, alongside its ethical and practical applications, will be crucial to ensuring they are prepared to thrive in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

#### **Conclusion:**

The region's unique characteristics offer both challenges and opportunities. By addressing technological, educational, and infrastructural gaps, the Highlands and Islands can create a vibrant ecosystem that retains talent, fosters innovation, and ensures long-term economic and cultural sustainability.

## **Meeting 2: Visioning group notes 29th January 2025.**

### **Presentations:**

#### **Alison Wilson, UHI**

The University of the Highlands and Islands has gone from a report recommending there should be a university in the region in 1992, to an established University with high levels of student satisfaction and a wide range of subjects offered. It also covers both Higher education and Further Education with school pupils doing subjects through to post graduate students all mixing in the university. Because of the nature of the region, it has 70 learning centres spread across the area. The University has had success attracting commercial partnerships in some subject areas, bringing additional resources and knowledge. The University also has a unique remit, as the economic development of the Highlands and Islands is at the core of its offerings.

#### **Alex Smith**

Alex Smith highlighted the work that HIE and XpoNorth Digital have been involved in, and the aim to increase the number of young people with the necessary digital skills to keep a greater part of the supply chain within the region and aid retention of young people. One area that is to be developed, is how we use these skills and resources to aid more businesses to reach global markets through D2C platforms and the opportunity that heritage offers to pilot these approaches. The XpoNorth video was shown, and raised comments on the way it presents community, care for culture etc and quality.

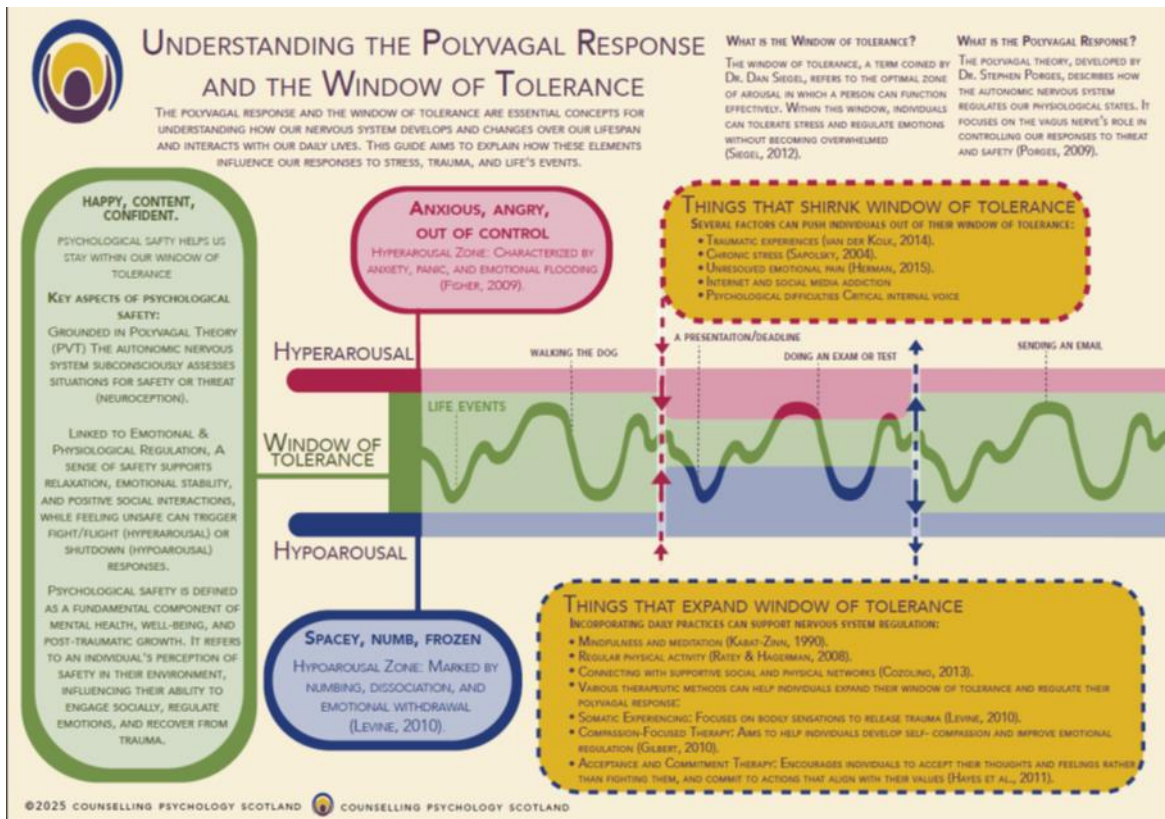
### **Specific challenges and opportunities**

**MCR Pathways and Mentoring** - Sharon provided an overview of MCR Pathways' work, particularly in mentoring. The organization follows a relationship-based model, ensuring that young people have a trusted adult in their lives. She emphasised the importance of making sure disadvantaged young people are not excluded from the opportunities being developed. This point was unanimously agreed upon by attendees. The discussion also covered the accessibility of programmes for young people, noting that many initiatives are not promoted through the platforms and channels they typically use. Expanding business involvement in mentoring was suggested as a potential solution.

**Community Building and Cross-Sector Collaboration** - The example of Burning Man was raised as an illustration of how events can foster self-reliance and mutual support. Similarly, the role of "artists in residence" in businesses and communities was discussed as a means to encourage collaboration between creatives and businesses. Overall, there was strong support for initiatives that bring together communities, businesses, and creatives to craft powerful networks, benefiting young people in particular.

### **Confidence and Opportunity Access**

A key challenge identified was the confidence barrier that prevents young people from networking and seizing opportunities. This was also recognized as a business challenge, particularly for small enterprises, where individuals may feel that opportunities should go to someone else who could "make better use of them." The concept of the window of tolerance was explored, with discussions on how psychologically informed elements could be integrated into programmes. By teaching basic strategies to manage anxiety and step outside comfort zones, initiatives could help participants build resilience and expand their capabilities.



## Representation and Realistic Role Models

The importance of including young voices and relatable role models was highlighted. An example was given of a young woman based on Skye, who is successfully creating social content about life and work in the region. There was also recognition that case studies often focus on "super achievers" excelling in their fields. A shift in emphasis was proposed—focusing not just on extraordinary success stories, but on the practical pathways to achievement. The message should be that success is about approach and persistence, not innate exceptionalism.

## Knowledge Sharing and Practical Guidance

Rather than traditional training, the discussion favoured an approach centred on guidance—providing young people with the right knowledge at the right time. The focus should be on the impact of work and projects, rather than solely on personal career progression. It was noted that an increasing number of young people strongly identify with the Highlands and Islands, and their motivation to succeed is often linked to a desire to contribute to the region's development.

## Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Future Skills

AI was a major topic of discussion. While concerns about AI's impact on jobs were acknowledged, it was agreed that resistance to AI is no longer a productive stance. Instead, the focus should be on ensuring that AI is implemented responsibly—considering how it is trained, deployed, and regulated. For businesses, the key takeaway was the need to upskill employees. As automation reduces repetitive tasks, workers can be repositioned into more fulfilling roles. The integration of AI into initiatives such as heritage projects was seen as an opportunity. By pioneering AI-driven heritage storytelling and digital engagement, the Highlands and Islands could position itself as a leader in innovative rural development, offering valuable lessons for similar regions worldwide.

## Heritage and Online Engagement

The idea of developing heritage storytelling and interactive digital engagement was discussed. Patreon was suggested as a potential partner to explore, given its model for supporting content creators and fostering community engagement. New project suggested training digital service providers.

### **Regional Strengths and Coordination**

The Highlands and Islands possess significant strengths, but these remain largely uncoordinated. It was noted that the region has the potential to create substantial opportunities if efforts are strategically aligned. TA key message was that time constraints should not be a barrier to embracing change and innovation.

## **Meeting 3: Visioning Group – Summary (5th February 2025)**

### **Inspiring and Engaging Young People**

- The narratives around success in the Highlands and Islands often limit young people's perception of what is possible. There is a need to showcase non-traditional career paths (*the unpath*) alongside stories of excellence.
- Communities need to feel real and engaging to young people. Solid collaboration is necessary to ensure that opportunities and initiatives are relatable and accessible.
- Young people need clear invitations to participate in opportunities, helping them discover who they want to be. Many online opportunities exist but are not being effectively targeted or aligned with their interests.
- Work experience, job visits, and hands-on engagement with creative industries should be developed to improve confidence and demonstrate the value of creative careers.

### **Redefining Success and Supporting Career Pathways**

- Success needs to be reframed beyond purely financial achievement to include contributions to the region's economic and cultural goals. Understanding how young people define success is crucial.
- Multiple career paths are becoming the norm, requiring new ways to exhibit and share inspiration.
- Access to networks is critical for creative careers. Examples highlighted how young people with talent and drive often struggle due to a lack of monetisation skills, networking opportunities, and career pathways.
- The closure of XpoNorth has left a gap in signposting young creatives towards opportunities, funding, and business support.

### **AI and the Future of Work**

- AI is both a tool and a challenge. The concept of AI mentoring was discussed as a way to provide continuous, scalable support to young people.
- AI can serve as an *assistant, advisor, and adversary*, offering support, guidance, and constructive criticism in a way that helps young people develop resilience.

- Businesses are largely unprepared for the impact of generative AI and need support in adapting to the rapid changes in work and creative industries.

### **Digital Heritage and Monetisation Opportunities**

- A proposed *Digital Heritage Project* would create a structured pathway for young creatives to work with museums and heritage institutions. Young people would be trained to produce digital content for museums, which would then be monetised via platforms like Patreon.
- There is a significant global market for cultural storytelling, presenting a strong opportunity for the Highlands and Islands.
- The project aligns with net-zero goals and sustainability by combining digital innovation with heritage and green energy.

### **Creating a Supportive Business and Networking Environment**

- Businesses need to be better networked to support young creatives and give them a platform to test ideas.
- Removing the "luck factor" in networking is essential. More structured access to industry mentors, funding opportunities, and career pathways is required.
- Renewables and AI together could be a transformative opportunity for the region, requiring investment and forward planning.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion highlighted the urgent need to rethink how young people in the Highlands and Islands engage with opportunities, redefine success, and access career pathways. While the region has immense potential—ranging from digital heritage to AI and green energy—these opportunities must be made more visible, structured, and accessible. Collaboration between businesses, educators, and creatives is essential to ensure young people can build sustainable careers without relying on luck or external networks.

By fostering mentorship, improving networking infrastructure, and integrating AI and digital skills into career development, the region can position itself as a leader in innovative rural economies. The key takeaway is that young people should not only be encouraged to stay and work in the Highlands and Islands but also be equipped with the skills, confidence, and support systems needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving world.

### **KEY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

#### **Limited Career Pathways and Guidance**

- Young people lack clear career pathways in the creative industries, particularly in digital content creation, project management, and business infrastructure.
- There is a need to redefine success beyond financial gain and emphasize diverse, achievable career routes.

#### **Skills Gaps and Education Shortcomings**

- Digital skills training is insufficient, particularly in monetisation strategies, legal considerations, and industry networking.

- Businesses and young people are unprepared for the growing impact of AI and emerging technologies.

#### **Lack of Industry Connections and Networking Opportunities**

- Access to professional networks is often based on luck, creating barriers for young creatives.
- With the closure of XpoNorth, structured industry networking and mentoring opportunities are missing.
- Network of employers to be established

#### **Infrastructure and Digital Access Limitations**

- Good broadband connectivity in remote areas is essential for young creatives to work effectively.
- There are no centralized digital or physical hubs to support collaboration and talent retention.

#### **Underutilisation of Regional Strengths**

- The region's cultural heritage and green energy potential are not being fully leveraged for economic and creative opportunities.
- Digital storytelling and AI-driven heritage projects could enhance engagement and global reach.

#### **Business and Market Access Barriers**

- Small creative businesses struggle with market access, digital engagement, and sustainable monetization models.
- Young creatives lack structured entrepreneurship support, including funding and resilience training.

#### **Engagement and Outreach Challenges**

- Young people are not effectively reached through existing programs and digital opportunities.
- There is a need for more inclusive, relatable role models and success narratives.

#### **Changing Nature of Work and Career Expectations**

- Young people are entering a world of multiple career paths, requiring adaptability and long-term support.
- Businesses are not yet equipped to integrate AI and digital transformation into their operations.
- Introduce Neuroception of Psychological Safety Scale (NPSS), which measures how safe individuals feel in their environments. It considers aspects like compassion, social connection, and body awareness. Can be used to measure the impact and influence we may have on the young people we work with.
- Work on window of tolerance for young people.

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated approach, integrating education, industry, and community efforts to create a thriving and sustainable creative sector in the Highlands and Islands.



## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE REGION

### Strengths

- **Rich Cultural Heritage** – The region has a strong identity and a wealth of stories, traditions, and artistic talent that can be leveraged for creative projects, digital storytelling, and heritage tourism.
- **Growing Global Demand for Authentic Content** – There is a significant audience for cultural and heritage-based content, providing opportunities for digital engagement and international market access.
- **Emerging Creative Talent** – Many young people in the region are highly skilled in creative fields such as film, animation, marketing, and digital content creation.
- **Potential for AI and Technology Integration** – The Highlands and Islands could become a leader in AI-driven heritage projects and digital storytelling, blending tradition with modern technology.
- **Renewable Energy and Sustainability** – The region's strengths in green energy could be linked to AI and digital industries, supporting sustainable economic development.
- **Strong Community Networks** – Existing collaboration between cultural, business, and educational sectors provides a foundation for developing creative hubs and industry partnerships.
- **Potential for Remote Working and Digital Nomadism** – With improvements to infrastructure, the region could attract creative professionals through co-living and co-working initiatives.

### Weaknesses

- **Limited Career Pathways in Creative Industries** – Young people struggle to access clear professional routes, with a lack of structured career guidance, training, and business skills development.
- **Perceived Low Value of Creative Careers** – Creative industries are often undervalued compared to traditional sectors, leading to fewer investment and career support opportunities.
- **Weak Infrastructure and Digital Connectivity** – Poor broadband access in rural areas limits the ability of creative professionals to work effectively and connect with global markets.
- **Lack of Industry Networking and Mentorship** – With the closure of initiatives like XpoNorth, there are fewer opportunities for young creatives to connect with professionals and build essential industry relationships.
- **Difficulty in Monetizing Creative Work** – Many talented individuals lack the knowledge or resources to turn their skills into sustainable careers, with limited business and funding support.

- Fragmentation of Support and Resources – The absence of a coordinated approach means that young creatives often struggle to find relevant opportunities, leading to missed potential.
- Limited AI and Digital Skills Education – Both young people and businesses need more training in AI, digital content creation, and emerging technologies to remain competitive.

## **ACTION POINTS**

### **Notes**

The report and proposed activity will not solve every challenge in the sector but is intended to kickstart collaborative approaches for practical help. The suggested activities do not aim to replace traditional models, but to expand the options available. Recommended activities will evolve based on experience, available resources, participant expertise and by the specific needs of an area.

The activities aim to enhance connectivity between organisations and producers without replacing successful existing initiatives and particularly emphasising the importance of the availability of specialist advice. Activity underway currently is marked\*

### **Career Pathways, Skills Development & Employment Support**

- Develop career pathways and guidance for creative industries – Enhance awareness of opportunities in digital content creation, project management, and business infrastructure.
- Expand digital skills training for young people – Implement targeted programs for digital storytelling, gaming, AI, and content creation.
- Support digital skills and monetisation training – Teach young creatives how to monetise their work effectively, including legal considerations like music rights.
- Increase hands-on work experience opportunities – Facilitate job visits and industry placements to help young people gain confidence and understand career options.
- Enhance mentoring programs and business involvement – Expand mentoring opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged young people, through business participation and youth-friendly platforms.
- Develop a structured mentoring network – Establish a sustainable initiative for young creatives, integrating industry engagement and AI mentoring tools.

### **Digital Infrastructure & Technology Integration**

- Improve digital infrastructure and connectivity – Invest in broadband access and digital resources to support remote creative businesses.
- Prepare businesses for AI and digital transformation – Develop initiatives to educate businesses on AI integration and responsible implementation.
- Promote AI and emerging technology education – Ensure young people and businesses understand AI's impact and opportunities, including ethical considerations.



- Explore AI mentoring – Assess the feasibility of AI-driven mentorship programs to supplement human guidance.
- Leverage the green energy and AI link – Explore how the region’s renewable energy potential can support AI-driven industries.

#### **Business, Market Access & Entrepreneurship**

- Support business innovation and market access – Provide resources to help small businesses explore digital engagement and alternative monetization models.
- Develop targeted collaboration with industry partners – Work with organizations like STV to refine pitch skills, industry knowledge, and business acumen.
- Strengthen self-employment and entrepreneurship support – Offer mentorship, funding, and resilience training for young freelancers and business owners.
- Develop digital and D2C (direct-to-consumer) market access for businesses – Help businesses reach global audiences, particularly through heritage-based content and storytelling.
- Explore partnerships with platforms like Patreon – Investigate funding and engagement models for digital content creators and heritage projects.

#### **Community, Networking & Collaboration**

- Establish digital and physical hubs – Create co-living and co-working spaces to attract and retain talent, including digital nomad pilots.
- Enhance networking and peer support – Facilitate virtual and physical networking opportunities for young people.
- Develop networking and confidence-building initiatives – Implement psychologically informed programs to help young people manage anxiety and expand their comfort zones.
- Encourage artist residencies in businesses and communities – Foster cross-sector collaboration between creatives and businesses.
- Create community-building events and experiences – Develop initiatives inspired by Burning Man to encourage self-reliance and collaboration.
- Strengthen industry networking – Establish a replacement for XpoNorth’s networking function to provide structured access to industry contacts and funding.

#### **Heritage, Culture & Regional Identity**

- Leverage heritage and regional identity – Support digital storytelling and local content creation to strengthen engagement with the Highlands and Islands.
- Launch the Digital Heritage Project – Partner with Smartify and CHARTS to create real-world digital apprenticeship opportunities.
- Leverage AI for heritage storytelling and digital engagement – Position the region as a leader in AI-driven cultural projects.

- Reframe success narratives – Showcase diverse career journeys, emphasizing unconventional and evolving paths.
- Improve youth engagement and targeting – Ensure opportunities are properly marketed to young people through relevant channels.
- Strengthen regional coordination and strategic alignment – Improve collaboration across industries, education, and government to maximize the region’s strengths.

## NEXT STEPS

Theme	Action point	Action	Status
Career Pathways, Skills Development & Employment Support	Develop career pathways and guidance for creative industries – Enhance awareness of opportunities in digital content creation, project management, and business infrastructure.	Work with SDS, DYW, UHI, MCR Pathways etc	
	Expand digital skills training for young people – Implement targeted programs for digital storytelling, gaming, AI, and content creation.	Developing content archive. Meet SDS and DYW etc. Meet PMI. Work with HIE programmes	Archive underway
	Support digital skills and monetisation training – Teach young creatives how to monetise their work effectively, including legal considerations like music rights	Programme – digital heritage /young digital service providers. Webinar programme UHI	Planning
	Increase hands-on work experience opportunities – Facilitate job visits and industry placements to help young people gain confidence and understand career options.	Employers Network. Webinar programme Invitation to young people – what should it contain?	Planning
	Enhance mentoring programs and business involvement – Establish a sustainable initiative for young creatives, integrating industry engagement and AI mentoring tools. Disadvantaged and neuro diverse and business engagement	AI mentoring for business elements. Combination required for Window of Tolerance development.	
Digital Infrastructure & Technology Integration	Improve digital infrastructure and connectivity – Invest in broadband access and digital resources to support remote creative businesses.	Significant investment from HIE and Scot Gov	Underway

	Prepare businesses for AI and digital transformation – Develop initiatives to educate businesses on AI integration and responsible implementation.	Webinars and workshops underway from Creative industries and Digital team. More options to be added. Collaboration with other digital support organisations across Scotland.	Webinars and workshops commenced
	Promote AI and emerging technology education – Ensure young people and businesses understand AI’s impact and opportunities, including ethical considerations.	Work with UHI and others to develop. Also, development of digital heritage project	Digital heritage project in planning
	Explore AI mentoring – Assess the feasibility of AI-driven mentorship programs to supplement human guidance.	Work with SDS MCR Pathways DYW UHI GSA to develop	
	Leverage the green energy and AI link – Explore how the region’s renewable energy potential can support AI-driven industries.	Develop approach	
Business, Market Access & Entrepreneurship	Support business innovation and market access – Provide resources to help small businesses explore digital engagement and alternative monetisation models.	Potential digital funds being designed. Pilot underway.	Underway
	Develop targeted collaboration with industry partners – Work with organizations like STV to refine pitch skills, industry knowledge, and business acumen.	Collaboration has started, but on an ad hoc basis. Develop plan to make more organised.	
	Strengthen self-employment and entrepreneurship support – Offer mentorship, funding, and resilience training for young freelancers and business owners.	Programmes being developed in HIE	Developing

	Develop digital and D2C (direct-to-consumer) market access for businesses – Help businesses reach global audiences, particularly through heritage-based content and storytelling.	New support programme being built	Planning
	Explore partnerships with platforms like Patreon – Investigate funding and engagement models for digital content creators and heritage projects	Webinars on funding models and platforms. Direct approaches to be organised.	Webinars underway
Community, Networking & Collaboration	Establish digital and physical hubs – Create co-living and co-working spaces to attract and retain talent, including digital nomad pilots.	Digital promotion programme being developed by HIE Digital Team.	
	Enhance networking and peer support – Facilitate virtual and physical networking opportunities for young people.		
	Develop networking and confidence-building initiatives – Implement psychologically informed programs to help young people manage anxiety and expand their comfort zones.	Follow up meeting being organised to create activity that will fit into all other work.	
	Use NPSS model to assess impacts of our activity on young people	Follow up meeting being organised to create activity that will fit into all other work.	
	Encourage artist residencies in businesses and communities – Foster cross-sector collaboration between creatives and businesses.	Creative Scotland	
	Create community-building events and experiences – Develop initiatives inspired by Burning Man to encourage self-reliance and collaboration.	Discuss with Communities Team	

	Strengthen industry networking – Establish a replacement for XpoNorth’s networking function to provide structured access to industry contacts and funding.		Planning
Heritage, Culture & Regional Identity	Leverage heritage and regional identity – Support digital storytelling and local content creation to strengthen engagement with the Highlands and Islands.	Pilot underway	
	Leverage AI for heritage storytelling and digital engagement – Position the region as a leader in AI-driven cultural projects.	Webinars planned	underway
	Launch the Digital Heritage Project – Partner with Smartify and CHARTS to create real-world digital apprenticeship opportunities.	Project being developed	underway
	Improve youth engagement and targeting – Ensure opportunities are properly marketed to young people through relevant channels.	Discuss with organisations working with young people	
	Golden ticket – increase access to creative events and activity for young people	Discuss with organisations working with young people	
	Reframe success narratives – Showcase diverse career journeys, emphasizing unconventional and evolving paths.	Discuss with organisations working with young people	
	Strengthen regional coordination and strategic alignment – Improve collaboration across industries, education, and government to maximize the region’s strengths.	Network development	Planning

## Conclusion

The development of career pathways, skills training, and employment support in the creative industries is essential to fostering a thriving and sustainable sector. By enhancing awareness of career opportunities, expanding digital skills training, and supporting the monetisation of creative work, we can equip young people with the tools they need to succeed and to address skills gaps in the region. Strengthening hands-on work experiences and mentorship initiatives, particularly for disadvantaged and neurodiverse individuals, will ensure a more inclusive and supportive environment for emerging talent.

Investment in digital infrastructure and AI integration will further enable businesses to adapt to technological advancements and explore innovative opportunities. Collaboration with key stakeholders, including Skills Development Scotland (SDS), Developing the Young Workforce (DYW), the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), and industry partners, will be critical in delivering impactful programmes.

Additionally, supporting business innovation, market access, and entrepreneurship will empower small creative businesses to grow and adapt in an evolving digital landscape. By aligning these efforts with Scotland's green energy potential, we can leverage sustainable solutions to support AI-driven industries.

Moving forward, a strategic and coordinated approach will be necessary to maximise the impact of these initiatives. Strengthening partnerships, securing investment, and continuously evolving support mechanisms will ensure long-term success for the creative industries in the Highlands and Islands.

## APPENDICES

### FURTHER READING

- [Scottish Government National Strategy for Economic Transformation](#)
- [Scottish Government Digital Strategy](#)
- [Scottish Government AI Strategy](#)
- [Scottish Government Innovation Strategy](#)
- [Scottish Government Culture Strategy](#)
- [UK Industrial Strategy](#)
- [Highlands and Islands Enterprise Strategy and Operating Plan](#)
- <https://www.creativescotland.com/resources-publications/publications/plans-and-strategy-documents/strategic-plans>
- [The-Creative-Economy-300x3001.pdf \(universities-scotland.ac.uk\)](#)
- [New South of Scotland Creative Economy Guide launched \(southofscotlandenterprise.com\)](#)