Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee
Scotland’s Screen Sector
Written submission from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Context

The Outer Hebrides face a variety of economic and social challenges with the top long-term priority for the region being to find new, innovative and effective ways of addressing population decline. The Creative Industries as a whole are critical to our economy (ONS figure for 2015 show many more people in the Outer Hebrides are employed in ‘Arts, Entertainment, Recreation & other services’ and ‘Information & Communication’ (media) as in ‘Fisheries, Aquaculture and Agriculture’.

Since the early 1990’s the Outer Hebrides have had a significant media industry built around Gaelic broadcasting with both the Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig (Gaelic Television Committee) and latterly MG ALBA established and resourced to oversee the production of Gaelic language programming and headquartered in Stornoway. Development of associated infrastructure has had vitally important impact on the islands economy and there is considerable potential for the sector to act as a further driver for economic growth and population retention in the islands. Providing work which will attract and retaining a young, creative and dynamic workforce and promoting the islands and its culture internationally. However as the sector grows, new initiatives emerge and other areas develop their offering we are very aware that talent and services will be drawn elsewhere if we do not grow our local industry accordingly. We would advocate that any initiatives taken to maximise the current opportunities across the industry seek to build on and bring targeted benefit to areas such as ours, we have an established foundation on which to build a very successful satellite of Scotland’s screen industry but require support to achieve this potential.

MG ALBA formed the first ever partnership television service agreement to operate under the BBC, creating the dedicated Gaelic TV channel, BBC ALBA which launched in September 2008. The expertise developed in the set-up and operation of the channel is rare and having such experience and insight locally is a valuable asset.

MG ALBA’s commissions awarded in 2016/17 valued £8.9m, of which 97% went to independent production companies - 30% of whom were based in the Outer Hebrides (= £1.7m direct local investment). The activity generated by the MG ALBA commissions levers in significant further investment and the creative, production and technical expertise held within these independent businesses is sought-after nationally.

An economic impact study carried out independently for MG ALBA in 2016 showed that they support approx.114 FTE jobs in the Outer Hebrides and Skye (both directly and via supplier companies) this is the equivalent to approximately 11,000 FTE’s in the Central Belt. MG ALBA direct employment in Stornoway currently totals 20 equating to almost 2,000 central belt-posts by the same formula.
The Gaelic soap opera Machair (1992-98) was shot on location in the Outer Hebrides in a purpose built studio - Studio Alba in Stornoway. Built utilising EU funding the Studio extends to almost 600 sq. m sound stage, has vehicle access and a full DMX lighting rig. It is regarded by industry professionals who have used it as one of the best facilities of its kind in the country.

In 2008 the Comhairle, in partnership with HIE and ERDF, invested in the refurbishment of property adjacent to Studio Alba, which saw the creation of the Creative Industries Media Centre (CIMC). This provides modern bespoke office and production facilities for MG ALBA who sub-let to a range of independent media businesses, external organisations, visiting companies and productions. The co-location of the CIMC, Studio Alba, BBC Radio nan Gaidheal the An Tosgan offices for Gaelic organisations and Isles FM have created a unique cultural cluster of talent which is the largest Gaelic speaking work-place in the world.

Use of Studio Alba declined sharply after Machair concluded in 1998, a variety of factors can be attributed to the current under-use of the facility but raising awareness of it as an asset to the Scottish screen sector and persuading production professionals that work is feasible and proven in an island context is key. The most significant recent use of the asset was in 2013/14 for production of the BAFTA award winning children’s programme Katie Morag, it is estimated that this created over £1m in economic benefit for the islands over the two years.

Response to priorities set out by the SSLG:

This response outlines the perspective of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar as a Local Authority seeking to harness the economic potential of the existing screen infrastructure and resource in our islands.

Previous investment and established expertise have created in the Outer Hebrides what is possibly the best resourced and most professionally skilled media base in Scotland out-with the central-belt. This base, coupled with outstanding natural locations make for a unique offering to the production sector. With a focus on Gaelic broadcasting and its critical cultural value to our area, we promote the facilities, assets, skills and locations to be found in the islands to all domestic and international productions. Nurturing development of existing talent and facilities clusters out-with largest cities is key to maximising benefit to all of Scotland. The Comhairle and partners would welcome the opportunity to work with the forthcoming Screen Unit to achieve maximum benefit to this economically fragile area.

The decided approach should ensure ongoing conversation and collaboration with all regions is embedded in the activities of the Screen Unit to ensure it has a truly national impact.

Most of the regional film offices in Scotland are based within or affiliated to Local Authorities and are often just one individual with a remit to develop film interests as part of a wider job description. In the current public-sector climate of constricting budgets there is a limit to the scope and scale of promotion, engagement and benefits realisation that these regional offices can achieve. It is usually not possible to respond positively to productions requesting even small amounts of funding and referring these enquiries to existing enterprise and business funding sources is often futile as their schemes not easily accessible to the sector. Relatively modest
amounts of funding, used innovatively to incentivise regional activity could be channelled through the existing film office network to help it to thrive and to extract the most from the experience and knowledge within it.

The SSLG and Screen Unit should support local areas to enhance their film officer posts and resource through regionally targeted production activity budgets; acknowledging that economic benefit in rural areas is relative and a steady amount of medium-scale production work can bring great benefit in terms of jobs and spend.

Also work with SE, HIE and all economic development agencies to ensure the resources available are appropriate to the sector’s needs and that a culture of flexibility is fostered to allow creative projects and practitioners to flourish.

The film and television market is an important platform for promoting our islands as a stunning destination and an attractive way of life, vital in the face of our population challenges. Factual and documentary programming showcases the area and there is also opportunity in claiming our cultural links to stories such as Katie Morag, Keepers (based on the Flannan Isles mystery), Whiskey Galore, Outlander, Brave and many other local references which have influenced cinema, television, literature and media. The potential of such activity requires to be fostered and developed in line with wider marketing campaigns and in order to achieve this links between the screen and visitor sectors should be embedded into any strategic planning.

Ensure there is a cross-sector approach taken to developing the economic potential of the industry – e.g. community benefit clauses from productions, further supporting Scotland’s representation at international events and exploring joint promotional initiatives between screen bodies and partners from other sectors.

Maximising the potential of Studio Alba in Stornoway should be a priority for the proposed Screen Unit given the acknowledged shortage of professional studio space in Scotland. Despite air links to Lewis and the larger size of the facility there the area has lagged behind Skye in recent years both for location and Studio work. The Comhairle would like to work in partnership with Creative Scotland, the wider sector and Skye to maximise the benefit to the islands of all the infrastructure and skills on offer here.

Training provision is one way in which the sector could contribute significantly to the regional development agenda. Given the experienced skills base and professional standard facilities in the islands there is a real and present opportunity for the Outer Hebrides and Skye to link to the sector training plan as it emerges, especially through collaboration with the newly announced National Film and Television School (NFTS). Again, regional dimensions should be considered as the form of this institution emerges, not least for the benefit of students to ensure they have the opportunity to understand Scotland and its screen industry as a country in total.

The advent of BBC Scotland will herald a new era for sister station BBC ALBA, however alongside possible challenges around competition for audience numbers there are also major opportunities, not least in the ten years’ experience MG ALBA and their supplier companies have established in delivering high quality, locally commissioned and locally relevant content. Research suggests MG ALBA is currently responsible for over 50% of all current Scottish independent production activity, therefore those companies already supplying BBC ALBA, many of whom are
based in the Outer Hebrides, are well placed to meet this brief but may require appropriate support for growth in order to benefit from this market expansion, please see comment at 2.2 regarding tasking and tooling economic support agencies to respond positively to the opportunities arising.

With regard to more reliable collection of data we would recommend that frameworks are put in place whereby production companies and commissioning bodies are required to estimate the spend impact associated with their activities and share this with the regional film-offices, SSLG and wider industry stakeholders. The current model whereby the onus is on the film offices to track screen spend through liaison with each production is flawed and open to significant omissions and misreporting. A framework which either incentivises or penalises production companies to cooperate in collecting and sharing this information would be mutually beneficial as it would not only make assessment and monitoring of the sector far easier in strategic terms it would also greatly support the case for encouraging more such activity, allowing local and national authorities are able to see the direct benefit the industry brings.