



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**Inquiry into Maximising the Potential of the Creative
Industries: Stakeholder Event**

15 March 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Inquiry into Maximising the Potential of the Creative Industries: Stakeholder Event

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Ms Francesca Biondi	Community Arts Partnership
Mr Stephen Stewart	Green Inc Film and Television
Mr Willie Drennan	The Ulster Folk
Dr Colm Murphy	University of Ulster

Mr Willie Drennan (The Ulster Folk): I am not too sure how I got roped into this. It is because I came in late, I suppose. I will do my best, and I will keep it brief; how does that sound?

The potential of the creative industries in Northern Ireland cannot be overestimated. I think that it is fair to say that for everybody. At this time, with our economic situation, the development of the creative industries is crucial, and I hope that the Government understands the potential there.

The second term of reference is to identify the key challenges currently facing the sector. I think that we are all agreed that there is a lack of funding and a great concern that the funding will be drastically cut. There was a bit of a debate here, because we are all from different sectors, about how that should manifest and what the priorities are. There was a bit of a debate about the idea of a hub or centre of excellence, as opposed to individual artists on the ground, through which everything could transmit out. We came to a consensus that there can be great value in something like the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC), for instance, if it is working with the community and there is consciousness of that. There also needs to be a balance of funding going through the hub so that the individual artists on the ground or the small entrepreneurs are not negatively affected.

The third term of reference is about investigating whether gaps exist in current policies. Certainly, there was a feeling that we are at a disadvantage in Northern Ireland as far as tax credits go. There should be financial incentives for research and development. There was general agreement that there needs to be investment in education and an awareness that, through research and development, there

is great potential a few years down the road for our young people to make a career within the creative industries. A strategy needs to be put in place to that effect.

There seems to be a lack of incentives — such as tax credits — for the creative arts here in Northern Ireland when compared with the South or other parts of the UK. Someone brought up the point that VAT is not included on tickets for venues down South. I am not too sure whether we confirmed the effect of that, but those are the sorts of incentives that we would like the Government to consider.

I suppose that I have already covered the fourth term of reference about comparing policies and strategies in Northern Ireland with other UK regions.

The fifth term of reference is about examining the extent and effectiveness of the collaboration and co-ordination between the industry and others. That is something that we all felt strongly is greatly lacking. To have more opportunity for networking and the opportunity to work in cross-genre, multimedia forms is essential here. To have the creative industries working outside the arts — working with entrepreneurs, science and other fields of industry — is very important as well. In other words, collaboration is crucial, and we hope that it could be considered as part of a strategy.

The sixth term of reference is about considering the creative industries at sub-sector level in respect of any funding and support available. This is where the idea of prioritising comes in, and that generated a fair bit of debate. There is a concern among some of us that prioritising could mean that there could be a form of elitism, which could be detrimental to certain artists in the field. My way of thinking is that it depends on whether you are prioritising different sectors or prioritising strategies. I think that it all goes back to the fact that there needs to be a strategy. My personal point, which I think that most people seemed to take on board, is that there is far too much bureaucracy and that more incentives need to be given to the private sector and more responsibility needs to be put on that sector so that we can cope with the changes in our funding.

Mr Stephen Stewart (Green Inc Film and Television): I hope that I can remember all this, because there was quite a heated debate here, which was good.

Fundamentally, we are all agreed that there is huge potential here and that it needs more support. The big debate at the table was on whether it should be commercially driven support or pure artistically driven support. I think that the conclusion was that we need to separate the two but that both are equally important. It is really important that we support the cultural side, the pure artistic side and everything else, but it is also really important that we drive the economy and allow it to help all the other sectors.

I will go through the various points, and I am trying to decipher my notes. We decided that, in order to work out the potential, some sort of economic measurement needs to be done so that the Government can then prioritise what is commercial. There is clearly some commercial benefit to be had from the pure artistic side through festivals, support or big events. Again, there was a big debate at the table about whether the pure arts is too Belfast-centric, because there is clearly potential outside Belfast as well.

Key challenges are really much the same. The point was made that pure arts should not shy away from economic value. There is a culture of pure artistic people not wanting anything to do with anything that is in any way commercial. That would be helped if they did not shy away. Some of the challenges were that people who are involved in the arts at a real grass roots level did not have any entrepreneurial skills. There should maybe be some sort of training so that, if they choose to become commercially minded, they have the skills to do it, but they should not necessarily be forced to become commercial. One of the challenges raised was that there does not seem to be joined-up thinking, even at a council level, for example, from different Departments. In order to grow the arts sector, you need the travel sector to work well and so on, and those things do not seem to be joined-up enough.

Do gaps exist in the support? I think that we all agreed that tax credits to attract artists would help. They clearly work. Again, as I said, entrepreneurial skills as part of a university course would help. One of the other things put forward was that it is worth recognising the freelance nature of the industry. Government tends to be driven by people who work on a pay-as-you-earn (PAYE) basis and have jobs for life or a job for a year, whereas we recognise that people in the creative industry tend to have project-

based work, so it could be six weeks of work or six months of work. Support should not always just be given for jobs that are going to become PAYE. I think that everybody at the table thought that there should be easier access to funding. It is just too bureaucratic. Some people at the table declared that they did not go after funding because it was just not worth the effort. That clearly should be addressed, because the funding is there to be used.

Comparing UK policies, overall, we felt that we should promote the package of Northern Ireland, which includes everything, be it the Titanic — we had a big debate about the Titanic — arts, music, or the Giant's Causeway. That created debate about whether it should be all-Ireland, because the outside world sees us as Ireland, comes to Ireland and does not differentiate between the two countries.

One other point put forward was that Scotland is far better than us about beating the drum about itself. Clearly, they have had many years to create that situation and build a tourist industry, but we felt that our politicians need to get in, be it to London or Europe, and beat the drum of Northern Ireland and the potential that exists here. We are a highly educated, English-speaking and very creative country.

As regards the point about government, industry and academia, more connection is needed to consolidate, because the various sectors do not know what the others do. In my own industry, the television industry, we only began to meet up with people from the other digital sectors about a year ago, and everything is joined-up now.

In the area of funding and prioritising, the issue that came up was the administration being too heavy. It is fair to say that we decided that prioritising exports was probably a way to go. Northern Ireland needs to look to the outside world, because that is how we are going to grow in the way that other countries, such as Scotland, do. To do that, we could prioritise exports. Those exports might include an arts festival or some other sort of festival that is being done here or they may be on a digital, film or television level. That is how we are going to grow.

Ms Francesca Biondi (Community Arts Partnership): Stephen was saying how important it is to have a holistic approach to support the whole creative sector. There is a need to recognise that there are different sub-sectors with different realities and needs. However, there should be a holistic approach. I want to mention how community arts can play a big part in nurturing talent here. We have talented artists who will decide to have a career in the creative industries or the different sub-sectors. Community arts is really important in supporting talent in Northern Ireland through informal pathways.

Dr Colm Murphy (University of Ulster): I will whiz through these, because we also made some of the points that were made at the other tables.

In answer to question one about the potential of the creative industries, we agreed that there is huge potential. There is a huge amount of creativity here in Northern Ireland, but there is not enough recognition of that, both on a commercial basis or in society recognising the craftsperson or artist as having a strong or important role. That is something that could be reinforced by policy.

A lot of people in the business are self-employed and have to do everything in what are almost like one-person industries. Again, there needs to be recognition of that. Sometimes in the formal structure of how the sector is recognised, a lot of grants and so forth are built around people who are involved in limited companies or bigger operations. The self-employed just do not have that scale, and that has to be recognised.

We identified three different potentials, all of which need to be addressed separately in policy. First, from the point of view of developing and promoting tourism, we talked about how successful craft trails have been elsewhere and the idea of introducing more of them here. Secondly, in regards to exports, we were all agreed that the indigenous market for our crafts and creative industries is just too small and is already saturated. In addition, the point is that, locally, people do not necessarily put a premium price on creative products, whereas, internationally, other markets do. That is another incentive for going out and reaching into those export markets.

With regards to the indigenous market, people felt that it is too small for the sector itself, but there is potential for growth there as well, which should not be underestimated. To develop for the export

market, you would need to develop the indigenous market first and to build up your experience there. To develop the export market, sales teams are needed to go out and sell, because the people creating the creative produce or service do not necessarily have the time or the expertise or skills base to do it. Again, if there was assistance for them with direct sales, it would be very helpful. We had a discussion about branding and about how other sectors do that, such as with the Kilkenny brand and so forth. We discussed the merits of doing that and of putting networks of people together.

That sums up our discussion of point 1 about potential. Some of our discussions overlapped the different points, so I will try to condense them.

Point 2 was about the key challenges that face the sector. As I said, because the local market is too small, it must be export-driven. There is a lack of investment in world-standard skills. In the craft industries in particular, it takes almost a lifetime to build up the skills that are required, and sometimes that is not recognised in policy. Skills need to be constantly updated, and that is not funded, nor is it recognised that that is a very important part of the creative industries.

There is a lack of global ambition to go out and do things, and there is a lack of resources and expertise in marketing to support that. The point was also made that we need to stop the sector from being too Belfast-centric. There was criticism that a lot of the agencies, because they are based in Belfast, seem to have a Belfast-centric approach to developing the sector, and much of the sector that exists outside Belfast feels that it is being excluded from development.

Point 3 was about the gaps in policy. Again, we identified the lack of training and upskilling and the importance of developing skills, not only craft skills but the types of skills linked to marketing and branding. The second gap is in microfinance. Again, the consensus around the table was that people in the creative industries do not want to become what we call "grant entrepreneurs". They do not want to be chasing grants all the time. They want to develop as craft businesses. However, we said that there was a need for what we class as seed financing to develop sales and so forth. That has been missing due to people falling underneath the thresholds that are required by Invest Northern Ireland because they operate on too small a scale. Furthermore, some of the grants that were available were for the wrong type of thing; they might have been for leadership development or management development or whatever, whereas what people needed was grant aid to develop craft skills or seed funding to develop sales skills or to employ a direct sales team. Such funding was not available. There seems to be a gap in provision in that regard. We spoke about how difficult it is for some of the crafts people to develop their skills in the first instance and that they have to invest in going to workshops in London and that kind of thing. The geographical position of Northern Ireland is a factor.

Point 4 was about analysis of policy elsewhere. We took a quick look at that, and we felt that Scotland seems to have extremely good policies for the development of the sector. The Republic of Ireland has policies that could be used here or adapted and learned from.

Point 5 was about collaboration. There was a consensus around the table that there was not only very little cohesion between funders but between individuals in the sector. The point was made that people sometimes had an attitude that they were in silos and did not necessarily always want to share information with what they would consider as rivals. If the sector were to grow internationally, they would have to get out of those silos.

People praised the Arts Council and said that it had some very good programmes, particularly now that some of the funding is being given on a three-year plan, which people felt was a much better way of doing it. However, there was a feeling that there was duplication between the agencies and that the need for more joined-up thinking could be looked at.

Point 6 was about prioritising particular sectors. Again, there were mixed views on that. I think that, in general, we felt that, yes, there probably was a need for prioritisation if there were a couple of sectors that needed a huge amount of investment. However, that had to be balanced with continuing to support the smaller people, because you never know where the good sectors will come from or the sectors that are going to grow. Therefore, you have to get the balance right between the two things. That is, I think, a fair summary. Thank you.