



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**Inquiry into Maximising the Potential of
the Creative Industries in Northern
Ireland: Stendhal Festival of Art**

29 March 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Michael McGimpsey
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr John Cartwright	Stendhal Festival of Art
Mr Ross Parkhill	Stendhal Festival of Art

The Chairperson: Good morning. If you give us an introductory statement, members will follow up with some questions.

Mr John Cartwright (Stendhal Festival of Art): No problem. First of all, thank you very much to the Chair and the Committee for the opportunity to come up and speak today. I see that quite an impressive list of long-standing organisations have been providing input. We are coming from the other side of the coin in that our event — the Stendhal festival — is a start-up, so it might be helpful to hear our point of view as opposed to guys such as the Ulster Orchestra, in that we have not had the experience that those guys have had. I will start by telling you a little bit about the festival, our objectives, the potential and where we think greater acceleration of opportunities for growth in the industry exists.

The Stendhal Festival of Art is based in Limavady and is an event that offers people the opportunity to come and discover a wide range of arts over a weekend. Last year's event was our first. We had over 1,300 people on site, including 35 bands in wide-ranging genres, from rock to folk to pop to bluegrass. We had all sorts of everything. We had Irish dancing, flamenco dancing, modern dancing, poetry, comedy, an art gallery and kids' workshops. We very much base ourselves as a family friendly festival, and we were very proud of the demographic that we drew. For example, the youngest person on site was six months and the oldest was 89. We very much try to appeal to and incorporate absolutely everybody.

We believe that our business model is unique in Northern Ireland and may be unique in the entire festival industry. We are constituted as a not-for-profit vehicle aimed towards becoming a multi-stakeholder co-operative. At this point, 15% of annual profits shall be commissioned back into local arts development through community groups and other outlets, 15% shall go to five charities, and, presently, 42 members shall benefit commercially from the remainder. We see Stendhal as a force similar in ethos to the likes of Ben and Jerry's and John Lewis. It is maybe not quite as successful yet, but it is a commercial/social enterprise that develops partnerships and collaborations with industry colleagues and local art providers such as the North West Regional College, the Roe Valley Arts and Cultural Centre, community groups, Limavady Borough Council and, of course, local bands and artists to help regenerate the town based on arts and culture.

We raised £16,000 from private investment last year, £10,000 of which came from London. We brought that into the Northern Irish economy, and we received deficit funding from Limavady Borough Council, 50% of which was funded via the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). That was £5,000 towards last year's event. We applied for other funding through other bodies, but, unfortunately, our experiences with the Arts Council to date have been somewhat negative. We will be happy to elaborate on that experience if the Committee wishes to hear a real example from a start-up point of view.

The subsectors identified as the creative industries do not include festivals or arts-based events, and we are not sure why. Those types of events offer people the opportunity to experience arts in a leisurely environment where they can explore whatever catches them in a non-curriculum-driven environment. The Discover Northern Ireland mantra of discovery is very much alive at many festivals in Northern Ireland. Keeping up to date with everything going on in the tourism sector, it is obvious that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board complements this Committee's objectives in advertising Belfast heavily as the "city of festivals". We recognise and celebrate that in our tourism ads, but it is not recognised as a subsector through funding channels or focus.

We, as a breed, are recognised for our hospitality, and such events outside big city landscapes can offer major opportunities. Granted, generating intellectual property is not an outcome of those sorts of events, but that is not a necessity given that multilayered festivals of art, music and culture bring together customers and sellers, provide a networking opportunity and increase the chances for people to start new collaborations such as the starting points of new innovations. As we know, if you want to spin out economic value from microenterprises, you have to give them local platforms where a lot of people can be exposed to their work and meet other collaborators for the potential to create new partnerships or even just make new contacts.

How do we enhance the market potential of the creative interests? We discovered in our correspondence with the Arts Council that Limavady is an under-represented area, yet, as an organisation seeking support, we were offered nothing. That has to be questioned. Events such as Stendhal can provide a platform to the performing and visual arts, crafts, music, design and digital, and nine of the subsectors were represented at Stendhal last year. It is our long-term ambition to include all aspects of the arts as we grow. Limavady, as you may or may not know, has high unemployment levels, comparable to those in Belfast, and some of the highest levels of child poverty in the country, and we believe that there is an opportunity at local level to accelerate Limavady and the north-west's regional strengths in music, art and culture. In 2007, Glastonbury was worth £75 million to the local economy in England, and, by 2020, we aim to achieve 5% of that. If we do, it would be a great boost for the area.

At the same time, Limavady's North West Regional College was renowned for its art and design department. We have a new Roe Valley Arts and Cultural Centre, which is an amazing building that has some brilliant things in it, and we have an area steeped in cultural and scenic wealth, including the Roe Valley country park, Benone and Binevenagh, 'Danny Boy' and the history of all that. We are working closely with Limavady Borough Council — Ross is now a member of the Roe Valley arts and heritage committee — to build our links and overall project objectives. Festivals are something that Northern Ireland can do very well. We celebrate their success in our advertising campaigns, so one of our main points is that they should be a subsector in their own right. There needs to be recognition of the potential that there is in a relatively new but growing market in Northern Ireland. We are not suggesting that funding should be proportional to the other subsectors but that, if Northern Ireland is serious

about building the creative industries, such leisure and artistic-based events can help to inspire the domestic market and, thus, its thirst for developing skills to support the broader aims.

Multi-tiered festivals that bring together the performing and visual arts, music and crafts accelerate the possibility for new innovations by bringing together people and ideas and media crossover. They cannot export directly, but they can build talented artists and give them a platform to get better so that they can export themselves. If the likes of Snow Patrol had not had the opportunity to play at local festivals, they would not have built up, so to speak, and would not have been able to make a global mark.

Support to the wider creative economy seems to be happening on a very individual basis and in the form of funding for only one person or one organisation. We would encourage the Committee to look at the City of Culture 2013's Culture Tech fund to see how government can facilitate new collaboration that can be of benefit to both parties and to wider society.

The Culture Tech fund sought applications for digital organisations to partner with arts organisations for new ideas. The application form was essentially eight easy pages, and we were lucky enough, along with a start-up, NonZeroSum, to receive funding for a new interactive digital woodland installation for our festival this year, which means that kids and festival-goers will be able to change the wood by sound and lights. It is all going to be very exciting.

More collaborative calls need to go out that are not just digital-based. If we do not do that, there will be a split in the creative sector between digital and traditional arts. Instead of raising the bar for both, we seem to be focusing more on digital.

We would be interested, as a start-up, to know how many people who are funded by the Arts Council are repeat recipients — not including the creative industries innovation fund — and what size those organisations are. There is a perception in the arts community, rightly or wrongly, that the same people are getting the same money year in, year out. That is detrimental to stimulating people to work in the sector, and it distorts competition in the marketplace. That is a fundamental negative of government's role.

Stendhal is lucky in that we have had great local support, both financial and non-financial. However, as entrepreneurs trying to do things, to us government can feel like a barrier — a disincentive instead of a facilitator. When you get knocked back, and you know that you have a good idea or product, it is disheartening. If you want the sector to grow, funding for the arts needs to be administered at a more local level.

We further believe that DCAL must look to promote the commercial market in order to fully complement the potential of our long-term exports and the creative industries' potential to become an economic agent of merit. The average professional artist who lives in Northern Ireland earns just £7,500 a year; that does not include those who do it just because they love it. A lot of the bands from Limavady who played for us last year said that they would do so for free, but we told them that we would have to find the money to pay them, because there was no point in bringing the festival to Limavady without the people from the area benefiting. We ensured that the bands were paid.

We did not pay the artists for their time, but we gave them a platform to showcase their art. We had great success with that last year, in the sense that four of our artists sold pieces and another received commissions for more work afterwards. Two of those artists were students from the North West Regional College who had never sold art before, and they were delighted. That is what we want to bring to the area, and we hope that we can continue to do so.

Celebrations, showcases of the arts and the organic growth of the general market via this medium would enable longer-term positive development of the sector.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Was this your brainchild?

Mr Cartwright: Yes.

The Chairperson: But you do not work full time at this?

Mr Cartwright: No. Both of us have other jobs.

Mr Ross Parkhill (Stendhal Festival of Art): We tried to get going in 2008. We were very young, naive and ambitious, and we tried to pull it around from the end of May to do it in August. That was a three-day festival. It was madness. We are still paying that off. We finally got it off the ground last year.

The Chairperson: I congratulate you. You deserve to be congratulated because you saw an area of need and are attempting to address it.

You mentioned a number of times in your written presentation and in what you said today the fact that there are limited resources and that you feel that they have gone to established large-scale events as opposed to something like what you are developing. I also noted that you were in receipt of community festival funding via the local council. We have the community festival fund as a result of Minister Poots recognising that when he was in position. Do you think that that requires development? One of your closing lines was that government needs to look at funding at a lower and much more local level. You also criticised the Arts Council. There are two questions there: one is about the community festival fund and the other is about your experience with the Arts Council.

Mr Parkhill: Last year, we set out with a budget plan of £55,000 expenditure. That took into account the hope of getting around £10,000 from other funding channels, including the Arts Council. We did not get that in the end, so we trimmed the fat, and our expenditure was £40,000. The community festivals funding was deficit funding. Although we could count on that in our budget, it did not add to our confidence in the budget setting — if that makes sense. Our aim was to put on an event that covered itself and washed its own face.

Mr Cartwright: Although it was there, we would have preferred not to have to use it. If we had to use it, it meant that we did not succeed. That was how we looked at it.

Mr Parkhill: It was a big challenge to us to wash our own face. Personally, we still have to pay off 2008 for another year and a half. Although the funding was there and we could account for it in our budget, it would have been nice to have had support from the Arts Council, which is the administering body. To be honest, things with the Arts Council were terrible, in my opinion.

The Chairperson: Will you expand on that?

Mr Parkhill: Yes. We applied for project funding, and we were rejected for three reasons: that we were too commercial in our approach; that no strategic business plan was submitted; and that we were scored low in planning, governance and financial management.

The Chairperson: Were you given any further explanation?

Mr Parkhill: Yes. That was the initial rejection, so we appealed that. We responded by stating that commercial organisations are allowed to apply for the project funding. Nowhere in the guidance was there any request for a business plan. As far as planning, governance and financial management was concerned, we had already set up a board by that stage, which included a prominent local businessman as our chairman; my father, who has 38 years' business banking experience, as our treasurer; and an operations manager who held management positions at V Festival, the Reading and Leeds festivals and Oxegen.

Mr Cartwright: They know their stuff.

Mr Parkhill: That is quite a good calibre by our reckoning. Then there was us eejits.

The appeal went through. It was supposed to be a two-month process. Reasons were given for why we did not receive a response within the two months, but I had to chase e-mails constantly to the point of

my embarrassment because I do not like to hound people. Lorraine McDowell came back and said that the board had upheld the decision.

The Chairperson: Do you feel, having gone through the process with the Arts Council and the feedback that you received from it, that you will be in a better position next time to apply for funding?

Mr Parkhill: I think that we are. In hindsight, it would have been a risk for the Arts Council to fund us because we were a start-up and we had tried before and failed. The last response from the Arts Council stated that it appeared that our board met only once per annum, but that is a complete supposition. We sent in our constitution, which said that we met quarterly. So that says to me that it was not even read, which is disrespectful.

Mr Cartwright: We were disappointed with the Arts Council in the sense that we thought that it would embrace something like this. We thought that it would be a lot more willing to come forward and give us a hand, as opposed to sitting back. The Arts Council was aware that we were new to this. It is the body that people in the arts industry look to for guidance and help, and it almost brushed us off as if to say, "Never worry about them ones up there in Limavady". That is the feeling that we got.

The Chairperson: You mentioned in your submission that there is tension between digital and traditional arts and that there is maybe an overemphasis on digital. In your experience with those who are involved in the traditional arts, are they being encouraged to diversify or to link up with digital entrepreneurs in their area or in your area?

Mr Parkhill: I cannot answer that.

Mr Cartwright: A lot of the people we know who are involved in the arts in Limavady are younger folk, and they are very open to that idea. As you grow up, you want to learn new things. Digital media has come to the fore in the same sort of way that media has changed. I am a journalist by trade, and journalism is now digital and internet based. There is a feeling that if you do not jump on, you will be left behind. In saying that, I do not know if there is a huge amount of feeling towards that. It is not my area of expertise.

Mr Parkhill: To elaborate on my answer: I moved to London in 2008, and I have just returned to focus on this year's festival, so I do not really know the local scene.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thank you, Ross and John, for coming here. At this point, I will declare several interests. I am very proud of the way in which these fellas have brought the festival together and put it together last year. I was involved in it through the council as far back as 2007 and 2008 when it was first mooted. I do not know whether I should declare a pecuniary interest as well because I bought a family ticket last year and then did not get to the festival because of family commitments. However, all the reports that I heard were that it was completely different, very successful and had so much potential to run on.

I have touched base with a number of community groups and community arts groups, and there seems to be an issue regarding the application process, which is rather unfortunate. I know that the Arts Council simplified the requirement for forms a while back, but I still think that there is a job of work to be done. The fellas also touched on the distribution of funding for community arts festivals. Some £13 million of funding was distributed for community arts festivals last year, and some £10.1 million went into the greater Belfast area. I am not saying that that is wrong, but the remainder of the funding has to be divided up among everywhere else. Some of it goes to Derry city, a little goes to Coleraine, and rural areas, such as Limavady, get very little. Therefore, we must encourage the Department to take a look at that, and the Committee should also look at that.

I have seen the Stendhal festival's organic development, and I think that it is probably an example of best practice. I commend John and Ross for the work that they have done. I also commend them for keeping the faith in it, because it would have been very easy, particularly as young people, to just walk away from it. They are putting themselves out. They put their own money into it in the first instance. Admittedly, the council came on board eventually, with a lot of gentle persuasion. However, there is a

job of work that we could do. We talk about organic development of the arts, but this is really where it starts. This is the showcase for these guys. The new cultural centre is giving an opportunity for young artists and for the local college to showcase their arts productions, which is absolutely excellent, and it means the world to them. They deserve our support, and they should get it.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for coming today and for providing us with your submission.