



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Maximising the Potential of the Creative
Industries in Northern Ireland: Association of Film and
Television Northern Ireland

31 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Association of Film and Television Northern Ireland

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Michael McGimpsey
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Pat Sheehan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Roger Fitzpatrick	Association of Film and Television Northern Ireland
Mr Micky O'Neill	Association of Film and Television Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: I welcome Micky O'Neill, who is the chair of the Association of Film and Television Northern Ireland (AFTNI) and Mr Roger Fitzpatrick, who is the vice-chair. Gentlemen, you are very welcome to this morning's meeting. Thank you very much for your response to our inquiry and for taking the time to come to our stakeholder event. I understand that you have other issues that you would like to raise, so, if you are happy enough to make an opening statement, members will follow up with some questions.

Mr Micky O'Neill (Association of Film and Television Northern Ireland): If you do not mind, I will read from a paper that we have prepared. Good morning, everyone. On behalf of the Association of Film and Television Northern Ireland, I thank you for this opportunity to address the Committee. Our intention is to keep our introduction brief so that we can concentrate on any questions arising from our written response, which I believe you have all received. We represent the visual aspect of the film and television industry and do not see ourselves as particularly good orators. Normally, we let our visuals speak for us, but I hope we can put across our passion for our industry and our commitment to it.

To give you a bit of background, the AFT, as its name suggests, is a body set up to represent professionals engaged in the production of the moving image in the Northern Irish film and television industry. We are a young organisation, but the amount of experience held by our membership and others that we have in our reach is vast. We held our inaugural meeting in February. We already have 140 members signed up, and our membership is growing pretty much on a weekly basis. We are an independent, not-for-profit organisation, run by professionals in the industry for professionals in the industry. We represent individuals across the complete spectrum of all departments involved in production, including crew, technicians, producers, facility houses and suppliers.

Some of our aims are to offer our members a forum for discussion; to promote their interests, opportunities, welfare and safety; to promote and maintain professional standards and good practice; and to maintain a liaison and open dialogue with other interested and relevant bodies as regards how we build our industry into a sustainable and lasting one. We see the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and this Committee in that light.

Currently, we have a committee of 12, and each committee member represents their own sector so that we can get feedback from the grass roots on their needs and the challenges they are facing. In order to encourage and maintain professional standards, a member of the AFT has to have been working at his or her grade for a minimum of three years, although many of us have been involved in production for a lot longer than that. For example, Roger and I have been in the business for 30 years.

Roger is a news and documentary cameraman with his own camera hire and facility company, and I run my own production company specialising in TV commercials. Since the 1980s, we have seen major changes in the industry. Back then, there was a reliance on news and current affairs, borne largely out of reportage of the Troubles, as well as on TV commercials and corporate videos. The independent industry has since blossomed, producing many major feature films and TV dramas locally.

We appreciate the broad church that is the creative industries and that you will have heard evidence from many other interested parties, some purporting to represent film and television. We strongly believe that film and TV production is a major player in the creative industry and that, as a body representing those actively involved in the industry, we are well placed to put forward the key challenges facing us. We applaud and recognise the work of Northern Ireland Screen, for example, in bringing work into the Province and the financial incentives that are there to encourage such inward investment. However, we are concerned that not enough local talent and ancillary services are employed in those productions.

We have in our ranks many qualified people who can and do work internationally to the highest standards, although we accept that a significant number of personnel employed in the industry are not yet trained to the high standards expected by international players. We feel that through training, strategic development, scholarships and/or apprenticeships, we can bring these people up to a level where they can hold their own against the best in the world and that, in doing so, we can promote Northern Ireland as a centre of excellence for TV and film production. We believe that once the incentives have dried up, as they invariably do, we will need to have this level of excellence if we are to sustain the industry and the jobs for many more years to come. Training is, of course, a short-term goal of ours, and we believe that it needs to be fast-tracked, as there are productions under way at present that cannot be extensively crewed locally. However, our long-term goal is to see the setting up of a film school or centre of excellence where we can have proper vocational training and make Northern Ireland a desirable destination to come to for production skills.

I will now hand over to Roger Fitzpatrick to summarise the points made in our written response, and we can perhaps answer any questions that may arise from that.

Mr Roger Fitzpatrick (Association of Film and Television Northern Ireland): First, the potential is fairly obvious at the moment from the amount of money that is coming in through the big HBO productions and the two or three other productions this year. We have also seen the development of the television sector through the production of a lot of kids' programmes, and so on, and the development of computer-generated imagery (CGI), which seems to be a very big thing, with some contracts for feature films in Hollywood being serviced at the moment. The potential is obvious.

Ultimately, the challenge is vocational training. An awful lot of people come out of media skills courses and film studies courses, but, to be quite honest, they do not know how to work in the industry and are not trained for the jobs that are available. We need to get those people up to speed on all sorts of basic things, from health and safety to set etiquette. They need to know how to behave when on a film set; not to talk to the wrong people and how the pecking order works. We need some hands-on training and a true apprenticeship with, as Micky said, strategic planning and scholarships. That is, ultimately, the key challenge. In our current policies, a lot of money comes into the industry, but it is not, perhaps, put in the correct places. We need to bring those people up to speed and spend the money on people rather than on hardware. I will leave it open to questions now.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for that. You dwelt on the issue of training and said that it is a challenge. In your industry, is there a feeling that, as individuals with your own respective areas of

work, you would be inclined to take on graduates or young people who are going through further education (FE) colleges and offer them the types of apprenticeships that you talk about? You have been talking about on-the-job training.

Mr Fitzpatrick: I have been through that. I had somebody in for six months who had five years of tertiary level education. We had to start by training that person on how to work, which is probably a big problem anyway because a lot of people are not trained to go into a job and to engage in the work. Unfortunately, after six months, that person went nowhere. That person had very high ambitions and was not willing to engage in the basic stuff. The job was essentially cleaning cameras, preparing cameras to go out the door and bringing them back in and, at times, going out to assist on shoots. After three months, we were still not confident that we could put that person out the door. The person had been so badly trained that we were spending our time on untraining.

The Chairperson: As an organisation, are you looking to work with schools and FE colleges?

Mr Micky O'Neill: You have to remember that we are all voluntary and all have our own work to do. Yes, we will liaise with all bodies. Personally, I do not think that we can set up training schemes. We have talked to the schools and colleges, and, over the years, we have all taken on work experience students from schools. That is OK if, like myself, you are in pre-production in an office and someone can shadow you. However, when you go on to set, the skills that are needed are just not there. For example, when people think of the film industry, they think of cameramen, directors and producers and have heard of best boys and key grips because they have seen that in the credits at the end of films. However, in construction, we need joiners, plasterers and painters. Our committee representative for construction has 80 people on 'Game of Thrones', and some other productions are coming that need a standby chippy — a standby joiner — who stands there and waits for something to happen. If they want to do a tracking shot, he has to lay track over uneven ground and has to be able to level it. They might want to take a door off to get a shot through a door and might want to move things about. He has only one person who he can send out on these productions. The productions perhaps come from outside Northern Ireland, and a high standard is expected. It is those sorts of grades that are needed.

You also have to have a nurse on set. If you are dealing with animals, you have to have a vet, and if you are dealing with horses, you need a horse wrangler. Security people are needed, as are hairstylists and seamstresses. There are all sorts of roles involved that you would not associate with the film industry. You cannot just take those people on and bring them along with you. They need to be trained and then placed on a production with someone else. They cannot just be let loose, as things could get out of control. Sets are very busy places, and people on set do not always have time to say, "Are you watching what I am doing here?" Therefore, a training course has to be in place before people are let loose on set. I am not sure whether that answers your question.

The Chairperson: We are relatively new to the whole concept of working with productions such as 'Game of Thrones', and it has opened up a whole new raft of issues for us. It has also given us opportunities that we perhaps did not have or did not see before. We perhaps were not aware of skills gaps, and so on. Roger, you mentioned that you had worked with someone who had gone through tertiary education. At that stage, is it too late? Do we need to start that work much earlier, perhaps in schools?

Mr Micky O'Neill: Schools and third-level education institutions offer courses in media studies, film studies and all the other things associated with that. However, on those courses, you are being educated as opposed to trained. Quite often a student will take one of those courses with the ambition of being a director, producer or writer, but no one thinks of the other skills, the worker skills. Kids could leave school at 16 and do something that will train them not only for the film industry but for other work. They could end up as plumbers and painters who go off and do other work but are on call when productions arise.

The Chairperson: So, they would be able to transfer those skills.

Mr Micky O'Neill: Yes. We and academia really need to talk more. We believe that there are too many courses that are not relevant to the business. We have too many producers and directors coming out, and we just do not need them all. We need people who are further down the scale.

Mr Fitzpatrick: We need hands-on people. We need camera assistants who know about cameras and who know that they will have to do a lot of cleaning when they start the work. They should be

able to recognise that and that there are opportunities to develop their skills and perhaps become camera operators.

Mr Micky O'Neill: Let us take as an example the likes of the electrical department of a production. The chief gaffer on 'Game of Thrones' needs electricians. Now, he knows loads of electricians, but they are used to rewiring houses. When you bring those people on set and ask them to bring you a 12k or 6k lamp, they do not know what you mean. They do not know the names of the lamps. ARRI Media in the UK has offered to show people around and help them to identify the different lamps that they will be asked to use and tell them what to do. Even if we had something to send those people, it would be a help; we cannot expect them to pay for themselves.

Mr Ó hOisín: I declare an interest because of my previous involvement in the Irish Language Broadcast Fund. I suppose that it was through that involvement that I saw how the industry works and the various issues that you have rightly outlined.

Is it not your contention that the real issue is the lack of commissioned work for all the people who have been trained or, as you said, educated? A lot of people are doing the various courses on digital media and so on, but there is nothing there for them when they come out.

Mr Fitzpatrick: You are totally right. There are also far too many people coming out of courses. I do not think that we could ever sustain the amount of people who are trained in Northern Ireland. I re-advertised the job I spoke about earlier and got 60 applications.

Mr Ó hOisín: How best can we address that issue?

Mr Fitzpatrick: The broadcasters are perhaps not commissioning sufficient programming. That is one point. We see bigger projects coming in. There is quite a lot of work coming in, but, unfortunately, the people we are producing are not sufficiently trained to work on the programmes. Take 'Blandings' or 'The Fall', which is shooting at the moment. People from here are working at the lower levels. There are not a lot of indigenous Northern Ireland people at the higher levels.

Mr Ó hOisín: Is the Northern pond really just too small? As is the case with many of the creative industries, we should be looking at things on an all-island, all-islands and all-Europe basis.

Mr Micky O'Neill: Yes, absolutely, and they, in turn, are entitled to come here to find work, too. So, there is a bit of a trade-off.

Mr Fitzpatrick: A number of companies here are getting international commissions and bringing them here, but we could exploit the opportunities a lot more. As I said, computer graphics work is coming in from America. We are in a good place, and we have a very good background in the media. We are probably one of the most media-savvy countries in Europe because we have been exposed to it for years. So, there are opportunities, and the big question is how to exploit them. How do you turn an idea that is bred in Northern Ireland into a 'National Geographic' programme or something like that?

Mr Hilditch: I want to ask about social clauses in contracts. You said that there are plenty of international commissions coming to Northern Ireland. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Fitzpatrick: Sorry; in what sort of international commissions? Films?

Mr Hilditch: You said a few minutes ago that there are plenty of international commissions coming to Northern Ireland. Is that not what you said?

Mr Fitzpatrick: No; I think that a number of companies in Northern Ireland are doing international commissions.

Mr Hilditch: Right. Are social clauses built into the incentives for people to come to a country to work?

Mr Fitzpatrick: I understand what you mean now.

Mr Micky O'Neill: We do not believe so. I think that, legally, they cannot be built in. Are you talking about a clause that says that you must employ so many people who are resident in Northern Ireland?

Mr Hilditch: Locally, yes.

Mr Micky O'Neill: I am led to believe that you cannot do that.

Mr Fitzpatrick: You are tied by European law.

Mr Micky O'Neill: But we would love to see that happen.

Mr Hilditch: If building work is going on at a certain location in Northern Ireland, social clauses can be built into the contract so that people in the area benefit from it.

Mr Fitzpatrick: It is extremely difficult. We discussed this with Northern Ireland Screen a couple of weeks ago. It is extremely difficult to do that when we are trying to bring in large contracts with Universal Pictures, Warner Bros, HBO, or whoever. Obviously, Dublin and other countries within Europe are competing for that work. If you start to push the social clause and say that you must have x amount of people on board, you might push the spend, but the companies will start to get cold feet. It is hard.

Mr Hilditch: You said that there were a lot of applicants for the positions that you have advertised but they are not skilled. Is that the message this morning?

Mr Micky O'Neill: As Roger said, he was trying to fill a job that was more of a technical job. He was getting applications from young people who have gone through third-level education and who really want to do anything that will get them into the business. I constantly get e-mails and letters from graduates who say that they will work for nothing just to get a foot in the door. There are too many of them. You feel sorry for them, but you cannot give them all a go. At that end, there are just too many people and not enough places, whereas, at the other end, there are plenty of opportunities but not enough people.

Mr Hilditch: So there are two different arguments. I understand now.

Mr McMullan: Are we being held over a barrel by the production companies? You say that we do not push the boat out as regards social clauses. Other countries have these clauses, and pushing them does not seem to be a bother. If we are going to really get these young people into meaningful work or apprenticeships or whatever, are we —

Mr Micky O'Neill: You are totally right, and I completely agree with you; we are too soft. One of our committee members, who hoped to be with us today but could not come, is a cameraman, a very good director of photography. He has shot movies in New York. He told me recently that he was working on a film where he had to shoot in Hungary. Now, if you were a top cameraman going somewhere to film, you would want bits of your blue blanket; you want your focus puller, who you know and trust, and perhaps that focus puller wants to employ his clapper loader, who he knows and trusts. Mark was not allowed to do that; he had to employ Hungarian people all the time. He was given an interpreter, because everyone was speaking in Hungarian, but they insisted that that is how they work, and I agree that something such as that should be happening here.

Mr McMullan: Correct me if I am wrong, but, quite a lot of these production companies are here because of the benefits they get from the tax breaks. So, even if you did not push the role of social clauses, they would still come anyway because of the tax breaks.

Mr Micky O'Neill: Certainly.

Mr McMullan: Do you not think that we should take that stand?

Also, there has been a lot of publicity in the paper recently about 100 apprenticeships in 100 days. Do you know anything about that?

Mr Micky O'Neill: No.

Mr Fitzpatrick: I have heard about apprenticeships and that there is a push for them at the moment, but I do not understand the 100 days point.

Mr McMullan: The other thing is, do you have any subcontractors that you would take on? Is it not up to the subcontractors to train some of their staff in going on to a set, so that they would be able to know what lights to ask for and so on? Is that not their responsibility if they are going to be subcontracting?

Mr Fitzpatrick: It is employment that you have to look at. Ultimately, when the production rolls into town, there will be the higher levels: the director will probably not come from here; the script writer will not come from here; the director of photography most likely will not come from here. We are talking about the lower level. We need to be confident in our skills base so that we can have qualified camera operators. An awful lot of our camera operators here cannot use the machinery that is necessary on a film set; they do not have experience and have never been taught in it. We need that confidence in our skills set, so that we can offer up people who can do the job, because if we start to put in social clauses, then you must employ people, and if they cannot do the job properly, the whole thing will backfire.

Mr McMullan: The whole thing is not geared up for this, then?

Mr Fitzpatrick: Yes.

Mr McMullan: Do we operate any kind of a scheme here where young people here can, let us say, be sent to work for some of these major film companies abroad for experience and then come back?

Mr Fitzpatrick: No; scholarships are what we are talking about. We would like to see that, but it is not just young people. There are people who have 20 years experience who have been filming for years and years and who could go on these sets, but because they cannot use and never have used simple things such as geared wheels or a geared-head tripod, they are near enough useless on set. The same could happen with an electrician who does not know the names of the lights. They need to be stepped up and pushed up. They also need to see different working practices throughout the world, such as how the people in America make a film, because that is slightly different to how Pinewood Studios would make it. These people have never seen that.

Mr Micky O'Neill: The other thing is, Oliver, you asked about us subcontracting and whether it is not the responsibility of those people to train up others. For example, if I am putting together a production, I would subcontract individual freelance people. I might employ four electricians — a gaffer and three sparks — but each one of them would invoice me separately. They do not belong to a company, so I cannot expect those people to train someone below them. Who is going to pay them while they are losing work while they are training someone?

Mr McMullan: They, themselves, can access funding to train.

Mr Micky O'Neill: Is there a fund?

Mr Fitzpatrick: Ultimately, the courses are not there. There are no locally based courses that would do such things. It would not be particularly hard to organise. For example, for the camera operators, which is something I know about, you would need to bring a good tutor who has got good experience in feature films over to Northern Ireland, get five or 10 people in and run a course for possibly only a week, and they would come out a lot better. After that, we would probably need to see lower level productions coming here, so that those people would get an opportunity to work on them. Then they would have a CV and experience behind them, so that, when the bigger stuff comes in, they have a chance to get that job and we do not have to import the skills base because the people here do not have the training or the experience.

Mr Micky O'Neill: That would be helpful. As Cathal said, we need more commissions. We need the broadcasters to stand up and be counted. In accordance with the Broadcasting Act 1990, broadcasters were meant to spend 25% of their programme-making budget with independent companies. At that time, a load of people left the BBC to set up those little companies. It was working great for a while, but none of the broadcasters are meeting their targets any more.

Mr Fitzpatrick: Our independent companies are, unfortunately, not getting an opening into the national BBC market. If you look at where independent television productions are made, you can see an awful lot of Welsh and Scottish stuff.

Mr McMullan: Why is that? We were fed the line that we were the premier area for doing this, that and the other, and it seems to be that regions that we were told were lower in the pecking order seem to have it better organised and controlled than we have. The Welsh are very strong on that; I read up on them.

Mr Micky O'Neill: Yes.

Mr McMullan: Why are we not so strong?

Mr Fitzpatrick: I think that that question should be addressed to our BBC. You could see production companies here that are totally capable of going into those marketplaces. An awful lot of our people have worked in them and constantly work in them. Look at 'Forethought', after the 'Channel 4 News'; it is locally produced. So we have the experience, but, perhaps, not the opportunity.

Mr McMullan: It is really the top level that we need to start with, and get work practices changed?

Mr Micky O'Neill: Wales was not always strong on film-making. Whether it is coincidence, since Wales has had its own Assembly, things have changed. I cannot stand over that suggestion, but the two things seem to coincide.

Mr Fitzpatrick: There is a large push for decentralisation of the BBC from Soho, in London. It is now in Salford and Glasgow, and it has a centre in Cardiff. BBC NI was not apparently — so far as I know — meant to become one of those centres. We do not see a large change in it.

Mr Ó hOisín: I am not clear, gentlemen, about the membership. Does it include all those local companies, the like of Green Inc, Stirling Film & Television Productions, and Tobar Productions?

Mr Micky O'Neill: You are asking about our membership? Our membership is not composed of companies but of individuals. Anyone within Green Inc, Wild Rover Productions and so on may register, and some have done. We are individuals and professionals. We are not like the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT), the producers' association.

Mr Fitzpatrick: Anne Stirling has registered an interest.

Mr Micky O'Neill: Yes. She has registered as an individual; it is not a company interest.

Mr Ó hOisín: OK. That is clear. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Have you finished your questioning, Mr McMullan?

Mr McMullan: I beg your pardon, Chair, I have. Thank you for your presentation.

Mr Swann: Gentlemen, you referred to the need for a centre of excellence. Have you had any involvement with the Belfast Metropolitan College and its new e3 building, which we visited last week? They have production facilities there.

Mr Fitzpatrick: In my opinion, that production facility duplicates what we already have in this city. I do not see a real need for it. We need much more specific skills than that. It is a television production studio, as far as I know. We have one in the BBC, and, rather than building a television production studio, moneys might have been better spent in renting one with professionals there and bringing students to it for a very short time. That could be done for a couple of weeks a year, after working up to time in a studio. You go in there and you learn how a studio works in real life.

Mr Swann: How do you see the centre of excellence that you talked about earlier? Who would it target?

Mr Micky O'Neill: The centre of excellence is a notion of ours. We are researching it. We have only been together since February, and this has come up in a couple of our meetings. We are involved in looking at other models.

Mr Fitzpatrick: Film schools, basically.

Mr Micky O'Neill: New York has been mentioned and Basingstoke, where K1 is, and in Canada there is a particularly excellent one. We are getting together a subcommittee to research and see what model is the best to follow.

We are not saying, for example, that we need to have a purpose-built campus. There are existing facilities that could be used. Rather than students coming to the campus, they could go elsewhere and bring in something to do with the Belfast Met. There are also other companies down in the Paint Hall studios.

Mr Swann: Is this only an idea at the moment?

Mr Fitzpatrick: If we could get the top-level skills in here, we could build a centre of excellence. We have a lot of people all around the world who are excellent in television and film. We see no reason why those people could not come back and pass on their knowledge. We also see no reason why we cannot bring knowledge in to train our people, and, as that knowledge base increases, we can build on it. Where it happens is immaterial. It could happen in the Belfast Met, for example. However, we need to build a core of people with that high-level knowledge and ability.

Mr O'Neill: An Oscar-winning editor in LA, who is from here, has joined us and is more than happy to do masterclasses and courses, but someone has to pay him. We do not have funds. We are not here looking for funds, but we are trying to get someone to take the lead to set up training or scholarships so that someone can be paid to come across and impart their knowledge. That is just one example.

We also have internationally renowned cameramen. They may not be resident here, but they are from here, and they will come back and impart their knowledge to young people because they know what it was like when they were starting out.

Mr Irwin: I apologise for not being here for your presentation. In relation to grant aid, I gather that you feel that there needs to be a change in the way the criteria are assessed, whereby grant aid is more focused on individuals and that there should be a wider assessment in relation to that. One would have thought that individual grant aid could be useful. Do you feel that that is not the case?

Mr Fitzpatrick: We have a very fragile marketplace here. We have very little work, and grants can very quickly distort that marketplace and give somebody an unfair advantage over somebody else.

Mr Irwin: Do you feel that the money should be targeted differently?

Mr Fitzpatrick: It should be strategically invested into areas where it is necessary. If you look at opportunities in computer graphics at the moment, the University of Ulster at Jordanstown is doing a lot on that. Therefore, money could go in there, and that could bring loads of people along. It could bring companies here specifically for a project so that we have trained individuals to fulfil the needs of that particular project or contract.

The Chairperson: In conclusion, to go back to the point that Mr Swann made in relation to the e3 project, I am disappointed that you do not see that as a good opportunity to use such a facility to train professionals in your field. It might be useful for you to have a conversation with those involved in that project to see where they can be of assistance to you.

Mr Fitzpatrick: Absolutely. We are completely open to that.

Mr O'Neill: We are trying to open up dialogue with all sorts of people at the moment. We are all involved in the business, so it is about trying to find the time. We have a few targets to meet. So far, we have seen Northern Ireland Screen, we saw the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure last week, and we met Stephen Farry here today. Therefore, we are going out to make more people aware of

what they do and get what they have to offer, so that we can say to our members and to other bodies where we think the challenges are and how they can be met, where possible, with existing facilities, without generating new ones and being counterproductive and spreading the pool too much.

The Chairperson: The e3 campus will be open next term, so it is probably timely that you have the conversation now.

Mr O'Neill: Yes. We also want to speak with the people in the Paint Hall. We want to talk to the producer Mark Huffman, who was responsible for bringing a lot of the HBO stuff here in the first place. We want to try to get him involved and see where he can help us out and where we can help him out. Therefore, we have a hit list of people to see.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for coming here this morning and sharing your views with us.