



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**Inquiry into Maximising the Potential of
the Creative Industries: Craft NI**

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craft makers and their businesses across Northern Ireland. The core objectives in that are advocacy and profiling of the sector; raising its visibility and the understanding of it; developing partnerships and infrastructure that support makers and businesses across Northern Ireland; and raising quality awareness, both with regard to creative practice and with regard to business practice.

There are approximately 1,000 makers and businesses in Northern Ireland, contributing around £20 million annually. The sector is very broad, ranging from traditional practitioners through to makers who produce product for retail or for commission through to others who produce studio work for gallery and exhibition and high-end sales. There is a broad range of practitioners and business types, and between 85% and 88% are sole trading. There are a vast range of specific markets within that. The average income for a maker is £21,500, and around two thirds of the businesses are owned and run by women. Around two thirds are located in rural areas, and around 68% export outside Northern Ireland, and 38% export outside the UK.

In terms of the craft sector's potential, on Northern Ireland's culture, society and economy of previous years, you will reflect back to linen and to ceramics in Belleek and other industries like that where decorative crafts as well as engineering crafts were a major contribution to industry and prosperity and to social development. I said that the businesses are of a broad range, so they do not all operate to the same markets. Some have an interest in tourism, and others focus on retailing their work. Others have a considerable export interest, and others will contribute to rural development. The programmes that Craft NI tries to engineer support that. August craft month, which is, perhaps, our biggest programme of the year, brings in 50 or 60 partners from around Northern Ireland that support makers and their businesses, being profiled, doing business and bringing in new audiences, hence consumers.

There is much portfolio working in the sector. There is a lot of collaboration with architecture, design, fashion, advertising, film and TV. We are pulling out a lot of the links with science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects, particularly in areas such as biomedicine and digital collaboration. There is a considerable body of research looking at the health benefits to the general population of craft practice, and the education benefits to school attendance with pupils. There is a very green agenda in the craft sector. Over 50% of makers and businesses source ethical materials when producing their work.

The priorities that I want to draw your attention to in the statement are as follows. In developing a policy or strategy for creative industries, the cultural industries are a key part. We are talking about creative and cultural industry. We are not just talking about the big hitters in software and film but recognition of the contribution and added value of micro-business sectors such as craft. We encourage the enshrining of that at the heart of any strategy. A general, one-size-fits-all approach would not maximise potential. Industry-specific expertise is absolutely essential and needs to be recognised, supported and made available. The breadth of practitioners, the products, the routes to market, the markets and the customers that exist just within the craft sector require that level of expertise and support.

We suggest that available funding needs better targeting, in consultation with appropriate expertise, so that it is not just government Departments and their agencies that are developing the criteria and priorities for the funds but it is done in consultation. In relation to the accessing of government funds, speaking from my own experience, there are significantly increasing difficulties in resourcing relationships with funding agencies. It is not getting better but worse, and it appears that there is little proportionality in the risks of accessing small amounts of money, for example. The preservation of arts and creative skills within education — primary, secondary and tertiary — is very important, strengthening emphasis on the skills, both creative skills and the understanding of business application, and providing cross-disciplinary opportunities to encourage innovation. Expanding the routes into creative industries is important, through non-formal routes as well as formal, through apprenticeships, through developing business skills support, management, leadership and training, and by providing support that enables business development in terms of scaling up businesses. I mentioned that the craft sector is a predominantly micro-business sector, but opportunities do exist for scaling up. However, that needs considerable support.

Finally, the last priority that I will draw out is the necessity to develop closer links with industry where appropriate, particularly in accessing resources, collaboration, equipment and production facilities.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. In your written submission, you state:

"As a sector support organisation Craft NI finds that the understanding of its remit and role is not shared across government departments and agencies."

Will you explain that, and how it may be overcome?

Mr Kelly: We were established by the Arts Council on the back of a Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) policy document on creativity. I forget the name of it now, but it was an interdepartmental policy that goes back some years. The idea was to link our organisation not just with arts and cultural practice but with the development of business skills, and education and training were part of that remit. We have found some difficulty in that we are funded by the Arts Council but we also receive funding from Invest NI, and the voices that we are hearing on either side are not the same. It is possibly due to the silos that exist in the way that money comes down, but we find that we are facing a number of different fronts on the common understanding of a broad role for supporting cultural practice within that business environment. We have done that for a couple of years, but it could be easier for us and more effective if those conversations were understood and there was a commonality of agreement.

The Chairperson: There is an issue of definition in so many things. What is the definition of "craft"?

Mr J Kelly: We steer away from definitions but, essentially, it is working with materials in a creative way. Our definition is not to provide a long list of papercrafts or working with clocks. There are lots of practices within it. We define it as a creative process working with materials in a highly skilled way that has an individual signature of the maker, artist or creative practitioner attached. For contemporary craft, we are also looking at how that pushes and explores the boundaries of the materials but the skills as well. It is a broad process definition that can include people working with traditional crafts as well as those working right at the cutting edge of the contemporary end.

The Chairperson: I suppose as a former member of Ards Borough Council I am very proud of the fact that we have been very responsive in meeting the needs of the craftspeople in our area. However, you highlighted one of the key issues, namely that there are so many sole traders, quite a number of them women, and that there are bureaucracies for accessing funding. What difficulties have you experienced in your role?

Mr J Kelly: Capacity is something that you will come up against again and again. The creative industries are so dominated by micro-businesses that capacity is a constant issue for them. Many makers will spend two or three days a week making their work and the other two or three days trying to sell it. The research that needs to go into looking at markets or application forms, guidelines and criteria, and understanding that, can be very limiting in how you envision or plan for the development of your business, and where you find the time to think big or blue-sky think when you are on your own and nobody understands your business the way you do.

When the first round of the creative industries innovation fund (CIIF 1) came out, the first thing we did as a sectoral body was to access funding to provide somebody to liaise with makers and the fund so that they could, for example, interpret for makers the criteria and priorities, examining their business, helping them to look at development opportunities and helping them with the thinking process, where they might go and how the fund might be accessed to support them in developing the business in a particular way. That sort of almost of thinking support, as well as the practical route into an application form, is really very helpful.

We work closely with the Tourist Board. There is a little document in there advocating craft and tourism. The Tourist Board has a comprehensive industry development programme. Craft is a small sector within that but we like to think of it as a jewel with an important part to play. Negotiating what the Tourist Board means by industry development, and transferring that into how that works for a craft micro-business, is difficult. So, one of our ambitions is to be able to resource some sort of liaison who would talk to makers interested in developing a tourist aspect to their work, understand their business, and get help looking at and accessing the funds.

That summarises the key issues when you face people who are simply not used to working with the necessary bureaucracy that comes with the administration of funds. Real help is needed to get the sector to respond. It works in a number of business areas. The same is true for exporting, and I could see it being true for aspects of developing business in a rural context. You need assistance with the R&D as well as the practical stuff.

Mr D Bradley: Morning. I just want to follow up on a point that the Chair raised. The word "craft" has a number of connotations connected with the past: homespun, folksy, cottage industry, and so on. Do you think that having that word in your title is somewhat misleading in so far as it has those connotations? When I heard that you were coming here today, I did not expect to see a reference to STEM subjects in your paper. Do you agree? If so, will you consider perhaps rebranding and using a more inclusive word?

Mr J Kelly: In some ways, you have hit the nail on the head. That word is understood in a whole range of contexts. Craft is not used just in the production of art and design objects but in engineering and skills. Somebody who plays a musical instrument, for example, has a craft, as does someone who writes. For us, it is a very broad term; you are quite right. Part of our mission, I guess, is to raise understanding of what we mean by "craft". There has been a lot of talk about doing that through titles and descriptions. However, we sometimes run into the same problems, because people try to define it in some way or to at least close down the definition a little bit by calling it "craft and design", which gives it a certain feel. Nevertheless, the word "design" is almost as broad and expansive as "craft". I think that we have struggled with it enormously. The whole sector has struggled enormously with what it means. I take your point. We as a sector, nationally and internationally, feel that we are stuck with it, but we embrace, work and do our best with it. Sometimes it is referred to as "applied arts". You get "craft and applied arts" or "craft and design".

Mr D Bradley: OK. I was thinking of something along the lines of "Creative Northern Ireland".

Mr J Kelly: For our organisation?

The Chairperson: And that could be even broader.

Mr D Bradley: In any case, the Chair also talked about the situation faced by a lot of craftspeople. Quite often, they work on their own. They have to order the materials they use and get them ready so that they can make the object or art or whatever you want to call it. They then have to market that and maybe gather material to put up on their website. They also have to meet the customer and try to make sales, and so on and so forth. Is there anything you can do to help to reduce that burden on them?

Mr J Kelly: The answer is yes, but it is probably limited. You cannot run somebody else's business for them. Ultimately, they will want to run their business. There are, for example, developing networks of retail opportunities. There are a number of craft networks in Northern Ireland that focus, for example, on supporting craft retail. Some local authorities work very closely on that. We are trying, for example, to build partnership relationships with secondary stakeholders in the craft sector. By that I mean museum shops and art centres. We are encouraging them to sell craft and be much more proactive in reaching out to them, because both have arts-focused audiences and seem ideal. Indeed, we have worked with some staff here to get makers' work in the gift shop at Parliament Buildings. It is about developing those partnerships and relationships and encouraging organisations with that capacity, such as, as I say, museums, art centres, colleges, universities and the National Trust, not just to sell makers' work but perhaps to bring in a maker and pay them to run a course of classes, which would, in turn, give them outreach into new markets and customers who are coming into contact with that.

There are many different types of businesses and makers, so our work is about raising awareness of potential relationships with local makers. I was chatting to the museum people outside about the museum in Enniskillen with which we work as part of craft month in August. The museum puts on an exhibition and brings in local makers. That is a good way in which we can generate local support. We are small, so we have to do it that way.

Mr D Bradley: Is there a similar organisation to yours in the Republic?

Mr J Kelly: Yes. The Crafts Council of Ireland is based in Kilkenny. There is also a Crafts Council in London. There are similar organisations in Scotland and Wales as well. The crafts councils in Kilkenny and London are much bigger. We are lean, small and very effective.

The Chairperson: Even if you do say so yourself. *[Laughter.]*

Mr J Kelly: As evidenced by my being here on my own.

Mr D Bradley: Is that organisation in Kilkenny related to Kilkenny Design?

Mr J Kelly: No. They are in the same physical space, but they are separate organisations. Kilkenny Design is privately run.

Both national crafts councils were established in the early 1970s. The industry looked quite different then. Both do similar work to ours, although they are more proactive because they have more capacity for direct delivery than us. Although we would like more capacity, building partnerships is a really strong way to develop sustainability and engage others. All of us are active, to some degree, in education, by working with schools or colleges. The Crafts Council in London is particularly interested in research and in pushing the whole agenda of crafts in the creative industries. I included a document on STEM subjects which is a really interesting read. It explores all of that. The answer is that there are other organisations like us doing similar stuff, and we partner with them.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you very much.

Mr Irwin: My question has been covered. However, I have another question about the potential for export. I see that 38% of business goes outside the UK, and you reckon that there are significant opportunities for more exports. What evidence do you have to back that up? What led you to believe that that is the case?

Mr J Kelly: As part of the research that has just been completed and that which we did in 2006, makers said that they are very optimistic about opportunities for growth. That is a pretty high figure — 68% — exporting outside Northern Ireland. It is north, south, east and west; that is how it works. The market is on both islands. We have seen quite a lot of change in Northern Ireland, particularly with younger makers, who have lots of those connections. We see quite a lot of people who have been in London, for example, returning to Northern Ireland to set up their businesses, but they maintain their connections. You get the sense that there is a much greater outward-looking approach. With a product as niche as craft, the Northern Ireland market will never provide enough.

The export figures are healthy and reflect a good attitude in the sector. We have some funding from Invest NI to support makers in getting out. That is essential because the costs of getting into the right retail fair, show or opportunity are high. It is not just travel costs. You pay to be part of these things. You have to have slick marketing. Those are all costs and investment for them. A key point I made in the submission is that CIIF provides an opportunity for investment capital that most of our sector would never have an opportunity of accessing. Investing in an export market, product development or an online presence are sometimes difficult steps for our sector. Something such as CIIF is really useful.

Mrs McKeivitt: It is good to see you again. Thank you for your presentation. I am getting a wee bit excited about the growth and the talk about schools and colleges and the investment that could go there. Showcasing internationally is a big thing at your end of the market. Do you know of the example of something like that working in the regional college in Downpatrick? I was visiting the Milwaukee Irish Fest, and students from there had made, I suppose, Ireland's quality brand and that Celtic brand and showcased their crafts at that festival. That is something in your report that I definitely have seen with my own eyes where they went back to the college and set up a business. So, there are examples of that happening out there and I welcome in your report the way that you can go in and sell and showcase. I suppose it is selling Ireland as well. That is something that I have seen and welcome.

Mr J Kelly: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: Joe, thank you very much for coming, for taking questions and for your submission. I hope to see you back at our stakeholder events.

Mr J Kelly: Absolutely. Thank you very much indeed.