



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**Inquiry into Maximising the Potential of
the Creative Industries in Northern
Ireland: Northern Ireland Screen**

8 March 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)

Mr Dominic Bradley

Mr Michael McGimpsey

Mr Oliver McMullan

Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Mr Pat Sheehan

Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Richard Hill Northern Ireland Screen

Mr Richard Williams Northern Ireland Screen

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Rick Hill, chairman of Northern Ireland Screen, and Mr Richard Williams, its chief executive. Gentlemen, you are very welcome to the Committee and thank you very much for your written response to the inquiry. If you would like to make an opening statement, members will follow up with questions.

Mr Richard Williams (Northern Ireland Screen): I wonder whether it would be useful for us to respond to some of the tax credit discussion in the previous session.

The Chairperson: We can do that now or during the question-and-answer session, whichever suits best.

Mr Rick Hill (Northern Ireland Screen): We will start by thanking you for the opportunity to come and speak to you again. Some of the issues that we have raised in our written evidence and will probably raise in response to questions are issues that we have rehearsed before with this Committee and the previous Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. Some of the things that will take us from good, which is, clearly, the position that Northern Ireland Screen is in, to even greater lie in the area of tax credits and some of the other issues that we raised previously.

I am grateful to my colleague for presenting some of the tax credit issues. Richard, do you want to say more about what is happening in the UK? There has been a lot of press recently about tax credits for high-end TV in 'Broadcast', the newspaper for the broadcast industry.

Mr Williams: It is useful to start there because tax incentives for the film and television industry are the single most important lever, driver or whatever you want to call it. A question from the earlier session was whether they are working for film in the UK: the answer is absolutely, 100%. It was correct to highlight in the previous session that — to put it in the negative — if there were no tax credits, the film industry would be decimated. There would certainly not have been any Harry Potter films made in the UK, or any big Ridley Scott films. There would be no big films. That is the first thing.

I have to confess that I do not know about the situation in Nigeria, but to answer an earlier question about India, the levels of support there are much lower, if there is government support at all. However, they have such a massive, built-in audience there. They have an indigenous local economy that works, which you cannot have in Northern Ireland or within the UK and Ireland. It is not big enough. It is interesting to analyse that. They do not require the same levels of public support, but they are in a very different environment.

It would be useful to update the Committee. Obviously, we are on record as being extremely keen to extend tax credits, particularly to embrace high-end television drama such as 'Game of Thrones'. That is probably the biggest growth area in the global television market. We all know that because we all see the celebrated, much more expensive television drama shows that look more like film.

Prior evidence was presented accurately, but I would have presented it a bit more forcefully. The UK and Germany are the only places in Europe that do not extend tax relief to high-end television drama. Even in Germany, there are mechanisms at the level below federal government to support television drama. Every state that supports film in the United States also supports television drama. Therefore, I would put that point a little more strongly. Also, the sector has recently discussed the need for high-end television drama, and, in UK Government circles, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) funded a report that I was involved with, and that has gone to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). It presents case study arguments for and against tax relief, with 'Game of Thrones' as the primary case study, and the value that that presents was highlighted. That case study has led to a very vocal debate in the sector. The trade magazine 'Broadcast' is the main place where film and television issues are debated in the UK and it has led with the issue in the past three weeks and is very much in favour of the extension of the tax credit.

I need to be careful what I say here, but DCMS has looked at the matter energetically. I believe that the Treasury is now looking at it, but that is a bit of a distance from me, so I cannot comment. It is a live issue. It might be useful to provide the Committee with some contemporaneous reporting on that, and I will undertake to do that.

Mr Hill: We have probably completely undersold Northern Ireland Screen in that regard. We have shown clearly the value of high-end television to our local economy and the impact that a tax credit for high-end television, similar to the one for film, would have. We have highlighted the good work that the Executive and Northern Ireland Screen have done over the last number of years. In a UK context, Northern Ireland is the shining example, which is a nice place for us to be.

Mr Swann: There is 20% tax credit for film at the minute. If that were raised to 25%, 28% or 30%, how much more money would that bring in?

Mr Williams: That is a bit of a red herring. The UK tax credit is working, and, if you go into the detail, you can see that it is competitive against some of the tax credits that have a higher headline percentage. It gets more complicated as it is to do with what you can claim the tax credit on. There are more generous rules in the UK in respect of what you can claim within your production budget. Therefore, that shifts the balance a bit, but I do not think that is a big issue. The big issue is extending it beyond film to, at the very least, high-end television drama, but, ideally, children's drama and animation.

Mr Hill: A lot of high-end television drama is going elsewhere in Europe. It is going to South Africa, Croatia and Hungary. We in Northern Ireland are trying to compete against a country that offers a 20% tax break on television drama, and we cannot offer one at all. That makes life very difficult in terms of attracting some projects to Northern Ireland or the UK as a whole. A number of big projects that are well known in the public domain have gone elsewhere. For example, Julian Fellowes' 'Titanic' was

made in Hungary. It is a story about Northern Ireland, and it is being made in Hungary. Why? Because Hungary provides a tax credit for television drama. It is undoubtedly one of the major factors that we have to consider.

It is also worth saying that both the First Minister and deputy First Minister have been lobbying Westminster on that matter. We have been writing to them and briefing them on it, and the value to us is very clear. The need to apply whatever pressure we can to the Westminster Government to get that kind of a tax credit for high-end drama is also very clear, and Ministers have been working hard on that.

Mr Williams: You asked some pertinent questions about the creative industries in your report. There is no silver bullet to fix any problem, but we responded that a tax credit is as close as you are going to get to one. It is extremely important for us because we are growing the sector at an impressive rate, but, if we want to keep growing it and retain 'Game of Thrones' and attract similar projects in the future, we will need tax credits. The curve will at least slacken, if not worsen, if we cannot achieve that.

We mentioned other things in our written report, and one that I would focus on is development funding. 'Game of Thrones' and similar projects are tremendous for infrastructure; new sound stages are being built at the Titanic Quarter as a consequence of 'Game of Thrones'. They are tremendous for job creation, but they cannot be the sole diet of the creative industries here. For a whole range of reasons, we must also have local producers supporting local writers supporting local directors to express every type of story from here. If we want to support that, the most important element has to be development funding, and, within that funding, there must be the opportunity to fail. We have been supported reasonably well, primarily through Invest Northern Ireland but also through lottery funding from the Arts Council, to provide development funding. There is also the creative industries innovation fund, which is currently administered by the Arts Council. That type of funding is absolutely key. You cannot grow trees if you do not plant acorns.

This is a repeating theme that probably comes up in every Committee and on every subject, but one of the key messages that I present to the Committee is that there is too much bureaucracy around development funding. There is too immediate a need for it to succeed. Development funding, by its very nature, is risk funding, and you have to allow projects to fail for them to ultimately succeed. There is a need to prioritise development funding and — this is always difficult — to have a fairly aggressive meritocracy around that development funding that allows the many other legitimate concerns to be prioritised at a lesser level. In other words, there is a need to back the projects that are simply thought to be the best projects, as opposed to projects that may deliver across a whole range of other issues, including geographical spread and a range of other reasons.

Mr Hill: We have been doing quite well recently.

Mr Williams: On geographical spread?

Mr Hill: No, on backing winners. We have to mention Terry George's Oscar. I am sure that you were wondering how long it would take us to get there, but that is the icing on the cake. If you look behind that, you can see that there are British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) awards, Irish Film & Television Academy (IFTA) awards and the Camera d'Or at Cannes. We have selected incoming projects that are strong, and an example of one of the development projects that has gone forward is a film called 'Good Vibrations', which you should get to see later this year. It involves local writers, directors and producers. It has gone through our development programme, and we assisted them and introduced them to people who helped to finance the film. We look forward to seeing it in early summer or late spring. That is an example of a local project that has been identified as strong, and we will see what the critics make of it when it hits the screens.

The Chairperson: You are looking for another Oscar then?

Mr Hill: We are always looking for another award, but, better than that, I know that the Executive are looking beyond the awards to the projects that are two and three years down the road. For example, 'Good Vibrations' came into us for development about four or five years ago, and it has taken about that long to get from that initial great idea to a cinematic release. So, the timescales are long, and sometimes the expectation is that they will be a bit shorter. People may have a great idea, but it can

take them a long time to persuade external funders to back it. I have digressed, but I have given you an example of a real project that is really from here.

Mr Williams: 'The Shore' is also a very good example of that. We did not break any rules, but we had to stretch and bend them a little bit to support 'The Shore'. However, with the benefit of hindsight and with an Oscar in Orlagh's pocket and one in Terry's pocket, the value is very obvious. To be honest, if we were a different organisation, we might not have backed 'The Shore', because it would not have fitted comfortably within our mechanisms, and there is tremendous pressure to stick to those mechanisms. Yes, we need very robust frameworks, but we have to back the right projects, and 'The Shore' was clearly the right project to back. It is comfortable and easy to say that now. At the time, it was a little bit difficult.

The Chairperson: Is that one of your risk funding examples?

Mr Williams: Absolutely. We need to avoid a situation where you construct the rules and regulations so tightly that every time you see something that looks good, for some unintended reason, it sits outside your rules.

The other issue that I would stress is that you have picked a very large, wide-ranging topic that has many elements. Weaving digital technologies, creativity, creative skills, celebration of culture, film-making and web development into the curriculum and injecting them into schools will have enormous benefit in years to come. We are very proud, possibly most proud, of our support of moving image arts as a subject and the creative learning centres. If this inquiry is a holistic piece of work, which it clearly intends to be, it cannot be blind to the importance of schools, teachers and education. We must give schools and teachers the tools that allow them to release creativity and really develop skills, because that is the biggest strength of the creative industries. It does not matter whether those skills are eventually used to make an Oscar-winning film or to allow someone to become a better businessman, doctor, landscape gardener or whatever: they are life skills, and they are very important. They should be prioritised in your focus, and, in that regard, I want to say that creative learning centres are a tremendous resource and have been very well supported by DCAL over a long number of years. They should be supported much better and at least have a funding stream from the Department of Education, which is the Department with primary responsibility for education.

Mr D Bradley: The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has responsibility for the regional colleges.

Mr Williams: We wait with interest to see how DEL's functions will be redistributed; presumably they will be split between the Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). We see a small opportunity in that to push these issues.

Mr Hill: We have presented you with our written document. We are back telling you some of the same stories but with more awards. Obviously, we are here to respond to any questions that you have about our written evidence or to respond on a wider basis.

The Chairperson: A common theme in all the discussions that we have had with you is the fragmented nature of the support, the bureaucracy that you find yourselves involved in and the fact that your funding comes from various streams. What would be the most straightforward and effective way in which funding and support could be managed for you?

Mr Hill: I am effectively reporting to two Ministers. Some of our funding comes from DETI, yet Carál Ní Chuilín is the Minister to whom I am accountable. I do not want you to take any negativity from this, because the relationships that we have with a lot of these people are very good, but there are just too many. If I could have one Minister, one Department and one funding stream, that would be the Holy Grail as far as my role as chair is concerned.

Obviously, the chief executive has to respond to a plethora of audit requests, not all of which are similar. There is an auditor's desk in Northern Ireland Screen. Inevitably, there is always somebody auditing something because of our various funders' needs and requirements, which are real. We aim to assist them in meeting those needs, but there are just too many of them, and too much of my chief

executive's time is taken up with meeting those needs and dealing with the inward-facing aspects of what we do. Clearly, both he and the executive team are doing some very good outward-facing work and have delivered on it. My plea is that we reduce that and allow them to do more.

Mr Williams: I echo that. The money always comes from multiple Departments, but, prior to that, it all comes from the same place. I do not see why it cannot come through one stream. We could report through one connected accountability mechanism. I echo what my chairperson has said. We pride ourselves on being an active organisation. We do not see ourselves as a grant-making organisation. We do not want to be sitting in our office ensuring that our governance is right and that we are using the right mechanisms to give out money; we are out there trying to assist the companies involved to put projects together and to finance projects. We are out in the global marketplace trying to attract people in. It is a simple see-saw; if we are spending too much time responding to multiple governance arrangements, we are not spending time doing what we perceive to be the real job.

Mr Hill: The board wants the governance to be right, but we do not want our executives spending all their time servicing the governance machine. The Executive clearly expect us to go out and promote Northern Ireland as a place to come and do business, and we have been doing that. This is a polite plea; if the process could be rationalised and streamlined, it might allow Richard, Andrew and Moyra from our office to do more of that. If we have tax breaks on top of that, we can make what we have go even further. It is about how we get to the next level. We have collected a raft of awards and we have brought in a whole load of inward investment. What would it take to up our game? Those are some of the things that I think would help.

Mr Ó hOisín: I declare an interest as I have been involved in the Irish Language Broadcast Fund through the years, since it was founded. I also want to pay tribute to Terry and Oorlagh George for the success of 'The Shore', and if her sister does not mind, to my friend Cathy Mooney, who was production manager on the film.

Surely the Irish Language Broadcast Fund was an example of best practice as regards delivery on an all-island basis? In real terms, when we look at television and film production on the island, we see that the South is still well ahead of the North in respect of production, expertise, skill and the historical record of film and television production. I am thinking particularly of the film studios in Wicklow, where there is a whole tourist trail based on the production of film there since the 1930s. Richard, you said that the tax relief was a bit of a red herring. That certainly might be true at the upper end of the market. However, surely it would be quite important for local indigenous producers on the island of Ireland. Is the way in which the Irish Language Broadcast Fund has succeeded with quite limited resources not an example of best practice across the board? Although we can buy into production methodology in Britain and, indeed, across Europe and elsewhere, we have a product on the island of Ireland that would benefit those right across our creative industries, keep people involved and ensure that the industries grow organically upwards rather than downwards from elsewhere.

Mr Williams: I certainly agree with you that the Irish Language Broadcast Fund is a good model. In respect of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund's ambition, we have been extremely well served by TG4, which is the broadcast partner for a very large percentage of its activity. If we could get section 41, which is the name of the tax credit in the Republic of Ireland, applied to the whole of Ireland, I would be very happy. That is not because of the differential between 20% and 28% but because it would extend to include all television drama; animation, which would be superb, children's drama and whatever. From my point of view, that would be a perfectly satisfactory, exciting solution. However, I am not aware of a mechanism that would allow that to happen at present.

I do not disagree with anything that you said about the heritage of the film and television industry in the South of Ireland, particularly around Wicklow. We are in friendly competition with our southern colleagues in the industry, and they look at us very jealously at the moment. They do not see the situation in the same way as you characterised it. They see our industry dynamically grasping more of the marketplace and theirs plateauing, because they have not had big film productions of late. The truth is somewhere in between. They have a very mature, dynamic sector, and I would not say otherwise, but they look enviously at our success.

Mr Hill: The red herring is increasing the tax credit for film only, which will continue to deliver film only. The obvious game changer for us would be if that were extended to high-end TV drama. I am not talking about the weather or 'Coronation Street'. I am talking about really big spend projects. So, an extra 5% could be added on to the film tax credit, and film will continue to be delivered. However, we are asking for something much broader. We have great children's TV production companies in Northern Ireland such as Sixteen South, which is making programmes for Sprout, one of the biggest channels in the USA, and is working with The Jim Henson Company. It is exploiting great opportunities. How can we help it to continue to grow and develop?

Mr D Bradley: Good morning. The last time you were here, you raised that point about the amount of bureaucracy involved in monitoring or accounting for the spend of the resources that you get. So the situation has not changed in the meantime. Maybe that is something that the Committee could look to ameliorate.

Your paper states:

"The triangular relationship between the government, industry and academia does not function in the best interests of the screen industries."

You also mentioned funding. You obviously think that not enough funding is available to oil the wheels of that relationship. Are you also saying that the universities and colleges are focusing too much on the academic side of film studies and not enough on the vocational side?

Mr Williams: I do not know that I was saying that, but I completely agree with it. What I was primarily talking about was that, for five or six years, we have been involved in an exciting initiative to develop a screen academy here. That screen academy was a partnership between the University of Ulster, the North West Regional College and Belfast Met. Those are the present partners. However, what I was very conscious of, and what weakened it greatly, was that the government funding was coming through DEL. We were really selling it to the universities that, because the academy was Skillset-supported and industry-supported, government would look kindly on it. That was the model that government wanted. It was a more vocational model that was more focused on skills. The truth, however, was that, over those five or six years, the partnership of those institutions developed the model but did not attract any government funding. In my opinion, that was because government funding is more of an oil tanker than a speedboat. The processes around it and the mechanisms that drive the funding were just not aligned to that. If they could be aligned, we could move a lot faster. It is not about undermining the academic rigour of courses. "Academic" just means questioning and thinking. We just want the colleges and universities to teach the skills. There is no reason why teaching people skills means that something is less academic.

The industry here generally thinks that the colleges and universities are more open. They are beginning to think in that way. Money drives everything, and, if we could get a government funding mechanism running in the same direction, we could move a lot faster.

Mr D Bradley: If extra funding were available, what would it be used for specifically?

Mr Williams: It takes colleges and universities quite a long time to design their courses. A fair amount would be spent on redesigning their courses.

Mr D Bradley: Are you saying with a greater emphasis on the applied element?

Mr Williams: Yes, absolutely, and with a much greater input. The big difference between American universities and universities here is that, in American institutions, the best film director comes in once a month and teaches the best students. That does not happen here. We do not have that tradition or those mechanisms to the same extent. However, we could have, and the screen academy was about that. It was about bringing the business closer to the education institutions and getting them into a much deeper and more regular dialogue.

There are examples of good practice. The University of Ulster is doing good work with Greg Maguire, who used to work for DreamWorks, and is now running courses. There is good practice, and we need to grow that good practice and do a lot more of it.

Mr D Bradley: I see that you have given us a hint in your paper. When you said "local government", presumably you meant the Assembly?

Mr Williams: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: You said that we could do more to move the BBC along a bit more quickly than it is currently moving. You also said that the BBC has devolved more programme-making to Scotland and Wales but that the same progress has not been made here.

Mr Hill: I have told the chairman of the BBC Trust that it has lacked a big idea for Northern Ireland. When you look at what has happened in Cardiff, Pacific Quay in Glasgow and Salford in Manchester, you can see that capital spend and programming have been put into those locations. The BBC has a commitment to produce 3% of network programmes here by 2015. We would like to see that greatly accelerated. If BBC Northern Ireland could be encouraged to find a big idea and to relocate to Titanic Quarter beside the Paint Hall and the college to create a creative cluster, that would be helpful. I am sure that the Assembly has a part to play in reminding the BBC that we have an ongoing interest in network programming from here. We have seen an increase, but we want to see more. We need to remind the trust that it really ought to find a big idea for here in the way that it has for Cardiff, Manchester and Glasgow.

Mr Williams: If you were to go looking, you would find plenty of evidence in Hansard to show that, in Scotland and Wales, there has been a bigger focus on looking at what you are looking at now — the creative industries and, particularly, broadcasting. I believe that Scotland and Wales have a more developed dialogue with the BBC on the importance of what they do, not just in respect of news reporting, but in respect of cultural, economic and job creation value.

Mr D Bradley: This is an important point about the BBC's 3% programming target: why has it not moved on it as quickly as you would have liked it to? Is the problem in London or in Belfast, or is it a combination of both?

Mr Williams: The biggest problem has been in London. Broadcasters generally have become very London-centric. You can see that on television, and we are very conscious of it as viewers. That has been the biggest problem. I could take the conversation full circle. For a time, BBC Northern Ireland had a very vibrant drama department that made a lot of programmes, the most memorable being 'Ballykissangel'. However, the vast majority of that job creation value went to Wicklow because of the tax credit.

As far as I am concerned, the problem has largely been a lack of belief that it was sufficiently important that the BBC delivered for Northern Ireland. If the BBC wants to make 3% of programmes in Northern Ireland, it can do so tomorrow. It is just a question of how much it prioritises that over the 100 other things that it is worrying about. That has been the primary issue. The good news is that, after many years, we are seeing very positive movement on that. The BBC has commissioned a network drama set in Northern Ireland, and pre-production is under way at the moment. That will be the first for at least a decade.

Mr Hill: It is worth pointing out that, at the Belfast Media Festival, which is now becoming an event for the sector, there was a seminar entitled "The secret of our success". I listened to a number of independent production companies and one producer, who is now world-renowned, talking about what has been successful for them. They have been successful by selling outside the UK to America and by selling globally. They did that because they were finding it so difficult to attract any network commissions from the BBC. Therefore, in the past, the secret of their success seems to have meant having to go and sell elsewhere. They should be able to do that and work with the BBC, and perhaps we are seeing the shoots of something new happening through some network dramas that have been commissioned. It would be helpful if our politicians could continue to show the interest that they have shown in this. Producing more programmes may be linked to the interest that they are showing.

Mr McMullan: You made an interesting point that, because of the number of funding agencies, people look inwards and become reliant on funding rather than looking outward to the international market. What is the thinking behind that, and can you provide an example of that? It would be naive of us to think that the BBC or UTV is not taking advantage of the tax incentives in the South of Ireland and making programmes there and bringing them back here. It would make sense in the long run to have some sort of conformity in that, because I can see your point. I counted more than 30 funding agencies mentioned in your paper, and, according to it, that is only the tip of the iceberg. What is your thinking behind your point about inward thinking not outward thinking? Are you saying that there should be less funding or more competitive funding?

Mr Williams: I am not saying that there should be less funding. I am saying that the funding should be tidied up and the administration of the funding should be made cheaper. When I was first involved with Northern Ireland Screen, we were really the only body working in this area. At that time, which was quite a while ago, there was not tremendous belief that it could be a growth area. One of the consequences of the success of the sector is that it has become more interesting and that more organisations have come into being and got involved. My view is that that is simply inefficient. It is better for producers to know that there is one place that represents public support for them in any given area. That does not mean cutting the amount of support; it means cutting the time that it takes for them to work out where all the support is. Rather than having a patchwork quilt of support for any given project, we could have it all come through the one place and save time and money on administering it. We should ensure that it is all consistent with a growth strategy that is about getting our best and brightest out into a global marketplace where they can compete, because they can compete.

There is no doubt that we have a complicated public sector. There are lots of places where a producer could at least go and ask whether they could get support. Of course BBC and ITV will avail themselves of tax credits in the South, if those are there. Similarly, if a producer here thinks that they might be able to get support from 10 different places, they will go and ask them all. I am generalising, but the tendency is for a lot of that to be pretty complicated. A lot of those discussions may not necessarily be to the real benefit of the producer and may distract the producer from the original purpose, which is to develop the idea and go out and sell it.

Mr Hill: My point about the inward-looking aspect is that, as chief executive, Richard has to have conversations with DCMS in relation to the Irish language and Ulster Scots; the British Film Institute (BFI); Invest NI in relation to another tranche of funding: the Arts Council, because the lottery funding comes via the Arts Council; and DCAL, because it is our core funder. Instead of having one conversation with one sponsor Department and one field of accountability, he has five or six conversations. Instead of having six conversations, I would try to have one, if possible. A lot of time is spent on that, and that is how it is. Perhaps we just have to live with that, if no one can do anything better to rationalise the funding and that is how it has to be in order to deliver, and deliver superbly. However, it would be smarter if it could be rationalised and we had one sponsor Department and one stream of funding and accountability.

Mr Williams: None of this is about Northern Ireland Screen. It is about the sector and the people in the sector. Too much of the policy discussion takes place in the public sector. If this Committee were to create a workshop to discuss the development of this area tomorrow, there would be more public sector people than private sector people at the meeting, by a ratio of probably 3:1 or 4:1. That cannot be right, and it is not healthy for the development of the sector. Therefore, in a way, we need to get ownership. The development of the sector needs to be primarily with producers and companies that are working in the area. The fragmentation of funding and whatever else just makes that worse.

I am not at all saying that there should be less money. However, let us make government's money easier to understand and avail ourselves of. Let us be more willing to take risks with the same interest in the results, ideally with bigger interest in the results. Let us be simpler and more efficient so that we do not crowd out the private sector.

Mr McMullan: It would be interesting to see your breakdown of that on paper, because that would be your blueprint or plan. It would be extremely helpful if we had that, given what you have said. Hearing

from people at the coalface about how they think it should or would work can be a great benefit to those who are trying to make it work or look for a solution.

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, thanks again for the presentation.

Mr D Bradley: If you do not mind, I will ask one more question. There was a conference on venture capital here yesterday. I heard on a radio piece that 'The Shore' was financed in that way. How big an element is that in the industry? Should it be developed further?

Mr Williams: Yes, it should absolutely be developed. I wrote a piece for the 'Belfast Telegraph' the other day — I am not sure when it will go out — highlighting Lough Shore Investment's involvement in 'The Shore'. I made the point that I hoped that others would follow Danny Moore and Stevie Morrow's lead. There are new mechanisms. A new seed enterprise investment scheme is to be launched in April, the start of the new financial year, which may provide opportunity and help in respect of development funding.

If we are going to grow the sector here, I do not see any scenario in which public funding can lessen. However, I see a scenario in which private funding grows and the overall results grow exponentially. So, yes, that is a very important issue. The Halo group at the Science Park has been very welcoming to our sector in that regard. It is about finding the mechanisms to allow private investors to invest. It has been helpful in beginning to tease out how that might work.

The Chairperson: Take two: Richard, thank you very much.