



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
Theatre Association**

1 March 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

Inquiry into Maximising the Potential of the Creative Industries in Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Theatre Association

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)

Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Dominic Bradley

Mrs Brenda Hale

Mr David Hilditch

Mrs Karen McKeivitt

Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr Stephen Beggs

Northern Ireland Theatre Association

Ms Eimear Henry

Northern Ireland Theatre Association

Ms Charlotte Smith

Northern Ireland Theatre Association

The Chairperson: I welcome Stephen Beggs, Eimear Henry and Charlotte Smith.

Mr Stephen Beggs (Northern Ireland Theatre Association): Hello.

The Chairperson: You are very welcome to the Committee this morning. Thank you for responding to our inquiry. Stephen, will you please introduce your team and make an opening statement of about 10 minutes? After that, members will ask you some questions.

Mr Beggs: Thank you very much, Chair and Committee members, for having us here today. I am Stephen Beggs, and I am the chair of the Northern Ireland Theatre Association (NITA) and the manager of the Bruiser Theatre Company. With me today are Eimear Henry, who is the treasurer of NITA and a member of Replay Productions. Eimear and I are two members of the voluntary board that runs NITA. Our one staff member is Charlotte Smith, who works with us part-time as a co-ordinator.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to present to the Committee on its inquiry. When NITA last gave evidence to the Committee on a budget set in a previous mandate, we were heartened that the Committee took up so many of our concerns, which resulted in a much less drastic cut in funding for the arts and theatre sector.

NITA is the representative body for professional theatre in Northern Ireland. We promote Northern Irish theatre on a local, national and international scale on behalf of our members. We also deliver tailored training; collect and disseminate sector-specific information; support and facilitate networking among performing arts professionals; and facilitate informed lobbying, research and advocacy on behalf of our members and the sector. Those activities are all designed to build capacity and to strengthen professional theatre in Northern Ireland. Our extensive membership is drawn from across Northern Ireland, including independent theatre companies, such as Sole Purpose Productions in the north-west and Prime Cut Productions in Belfast; regional venues, such as the Ardhoven Theatre in Enniskillen, the Down Arts Centre in Downpatrick and the Market Place Theatre and Arts Centre in Armagh. It also includes flagship theatres such as the Lyric Theatre, the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC) and the Grand Opera House. Also among the membership are Northern Irish theatre festivals, such as the Belfast Festival at Queen's, Belfast Children's Festival; and a number of individual members, including freelance designers, actors and drama students from the University of Ulster and Belfast Metropolitan College.

At a time when many Northern Irish industries are in decline, the creative industries stand out as an opportunity for continued growth and increasing global recognition. We believe that theatre and the performing arts are a critical and public-facing part of the economic potential of the wider creative industry that stand alongside the likes of film, television, design and the music industry. Although the individual needs of each sub-sector in the creative industries may vary, the industries share fluidity in their workforces and an equal potential to contribute to Northern Ireland's creative economy.

In our response to the inquiry, we wanted to underline that, as part of the industry and despite historical underfunding, the theatre performing arts sector continues to professionalise and consistently grow its economic and social return relative to the size of the investment. We are ready to take the opportunities to grow as part as the creative industries. However, to meet the aspirations of the Executive, we believe that government cannot focus exclusively on the development of one or two sub-sectors. To grow a sustainable and authentic creative industry in Northern Ireland, we must support and grow the existing creativity and link it to the aspirations of government.

NITA hopes that the inquiry will bring forth a sustainable and long-sighted approach to supporting the creative industries, which will recognise their vital economic contributions, their sociocultural value, the interconnectedness of the different elements that make up the creative industries and their interdependence on one another for economic success and inspiration. We appreciate that the inquiry has given the sub-sectors of the creative industries an opportunity to highlight the key challenges that must be addressed if the sector is to fulfil its full economic and social potential.

Culture and the arts are among Northern Ireland's most visible and internationally recognised assets. They positively impact on economic growth, job creation, health, education and social cohesion. If the desired result is thriving and productive creative industries, the litmus test will be the health of the arts sector.

Ms Charlotte Smith (Northern Ireland Theatre Association): As the most popular art form, theatre contributes directly to the economic potential of the creative industries. Around £9.4 million is generated annually in theatre ticket sales alone, and, with the opening of capital projects and forthcoming major cultural programming events planned for 2012 and 2013, we hope to grow that figure.

I will put the return on investment in perspective: the total annual ticket sales for the arts sector of around £16.2 million eclipses the Arts Council's entire annual budget, in spite of continued underfunding relative to other parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. The Arts Council has long championed the statistic that £1 invested by it generates £3 in the local economy. Indeed, a socio-economic study of one of our members — the Grand Opera House — found that every £1 invested resulted in over £5 being spent in the wider economy.

The potential of the creative industries for economic growth goes hand in hand with the potential for job creation. Theatre buildings and companies offer the direct employment of actors, dancers, musicians, designers and directors. Creative professionals make up more than 15,000 of the current 30,000-plus

jobs in the creative industries — 4.6% of Northern Ireland's total workforce — and creates additional employment for businesses through the supply chains connected to the performing arts.

In the past, investment in arts and culture has been perceived as a diversion of capital and labour into essentially unproductive activities. We believe that the success of the performing arts must be recognised, especially its potential as a feeder sector to the larger creative industries. There is an interdependency that makes the success of the latter inextricably tied to effective investment in, and fostering of, the arts. TV dramas and films, for example, do not exist in a vacuum; in fact, they would not exist at all if those involved in such productions did not have access, exposure and opportunity within the arts, and, particularly in the case of TV and drama, theatre.

Our neighbours in Scotland have pursued the economic and employment potential of the creative sector to good effect. With the creation of Creative Scotland to develop all the creative sectors, Scotland maintains the highest spending per capita in the UK and Republic of Ireland as it continues to build on the return on its investment. We are mindful of the commitment that the Executive have made to support 200 individual projects through the creative industries innovation fund (CIIF) the £20 million investment in the new Lyric and MAC and the £33 million invested in regional theatres across Northern Ireland over the past 15 years. However, without sustained support of the companies delivering programmes in the theatre sector, those well-intentioned investments will not fulfil their full potential return in the growth of the creative industries.

Very few creative businesses have the critical mass of in-house skills and market knowledge fully to exploit export opportunities. Performing arts organisations in Northern Ireland have achieved international success with touring shows, but more support is required to develop capacity, conduits and market intelligence. To fulfil our export potential, public investment must reward ambition. At present, that is restricted by our funding mechanisms. For instance, one of Northern Ireland's most successful exports to the West End was 'Puckoon' by the Big Telly Theatre Company. To take its critically acclaimed show on to an international stage, it had to avail itself of reserves built up over a five-year period, and many other ambitious theatre companies would not necessarily have the capacity to do that.

Ms Eimear Henry (Northern Ireland Theatre Association): We export a wealth of talent: people who leave Northern Ireland's theatre industry to pursue global ambitions. Growing our native theatre will allow global success to be developed at home, thereby retaining our leading talents in acting, directing and scriptwriting. Theatre also contributes to a vibrant, cultural nightlife. That is specifically cited by foreign direct investors as an important part of attracting the executive workforce that Northern Ireland hopes to secure.

Potential growth in the cultural industries runs parallel with growth in cultural tourism, an area that globally accounts for 40% of all tourist activity. Theatre and the performing arts will be a significant component of the Titanic and City of Culture tourism programmes. The creative industries also have the power to break down social boundaries, create platforms for dialogue, integration and knowledge-sharing, which, in turn, help to drive the creative industries' productivity and the economy of Northern Ireland.

In 2009, there were 64,464 captured visits to the theatre, not only supporting the performing arts as a critical part of the creative industries but nurturing creativity and social interaction for all involved, from creator to recipient. I could not put it better than the Community Relations Council:

"Theatre and the arts reflect our shared gift of self expression, our capacity for reinvention and can act as a catalyst for change. They provide a medium to reconcile our past and imagine our futures, and educate people in the values we share as a society."

An example of that, from the heart of NITA itself, is our member Terra Nova Productions, which believes that it is only by working at the points at which cultures touch that we can tackle the really big questions. The creative industries, in this case, are international in their outlook and breadth, as Terra Nova works with colleagues in London, Hong Kong and Greenland, but is equally local in its impact through programmes and projects with Polish, Bangladeshi, Mandarin and Cantonese communities in Northern Ireland.

Nurturing the creativity of children and young people is fundamental to a healthy society and a vibrant, productive and sustainable creative economy. As well as giving many children their first taste of the arts, thus ensuring future generations of actors, writers and designers, theatre can tackle important and challenging issues such as bullying, alcohol/substance abuse, healthy living, mental health and social inclusion. Creativity at the heart of education has tangible outcomes from increased critical thinking, problem-solving and literacy to lower absenteeism and improved self-confidence. In a recent report on the social return on investment, which was commissioned by Lloyds TSB Foundation on my company, Replay, it was found that, for every £1 invested in delivering our arts projects in schools, £4.20 worth was delivered in achieving key curriculum objectives.

The long-term success of the creative industries in Northern Ireland is dependent on an education system that nurtures and promotes creativity from the earliest age. The arts, in that context, are the most cost-effective and valuable mechanism in achieving that. Skilled, innovative and creative people are the creative industries' greatest asset. To fully tap into Northern Ireland's creative potential, government need to provide consistent policies and strategies for the education, training and retaining of such individuals. To enable Northern Irish industry, both creative and otherwise, to flourish, the arts must become an integral educational component, rather than just an educational add-on.

We believe that there must be a move from current educational models and methods focused on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) to models focused on STEAM, with the inclusion of the arts. That approach is already being pioneered in the state of Rhode Island in the United States. There, culture-tech businesses are evolving, and there is an effective education strategy of putting an onus on encouraging cross-disciplinary learning to assist the production of high-quality creative ideas and skilled people to bring those ideas to export. Apple and Google are two classic global examples of its success. If we want talented, creative people who will foster innovation in all industry, we must first invest in arts in education.

Mr S Beggs: Creative industries are interconnected and interdependent. Professionals move fluidly between the creative industries, and they learn, refine, transfer and utilise their skills and knowledge as they pass from sub-sector to sub-sector on various different projects. Investment in Northern Irish theatre has greatly enriched the development of a large pool of skilled arts professionals working in our industry: actors, directors, designers, technical crew and playwrights. With creativity heralded as the driver of social and economic change during the next century, the creative industries are a clear, sustainable investment for the future, and the performing arts must continue to form a part. If you intend to grow the creative industries, it simply does not make sense to continue to reduce the available investment to vital organisations such as the theatres and the performing arts companies that represent them.

We thank you very much for the opportunity to address the Committee this morning. We will be delighted to take questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your excellent paper and presentation. You are the first group to mention STEAM to the Committee. That is a really interesting concept, and it makes a lot of sense. Will you develop that a little more for us?

Ms Henry: In Northern Ireland, we are quite progressive as to where the arts sit within the primary curriculum, and the arts are a central part of that curriculum, alongside, and with status equal to, literacy, numeracy and science. In the secondary curriculum, the arts are not quite as strong but still have prominence and value. However, we feel that the importance of the arts needs to be clearly articulated in the strategy, starting with the training of teachers, in which there is a very clear weakness. At the moment, the arts are identified as a key curriculum target, but teachers in our schools do not have the training or experience to deliver that to its full potential. Also, the arts have cross-learning potential: they are not a subject that exists in a vacuum. Nurturing children's creativity is an essential part of learning science skills, engineering and computer science, and that needs to be embedded in the strategies, the curriculum and teaching methods.

Northern Ireland has made really good progress, especially at primary level, but we need to close the circle and take that right through to third-level education. When those people qualify, the next stage is to retain that skilled workforce in Northern Ireland and to be able to give them opportunities to work in the creative and other industries here.

The Chairperson: You spoke of well-intentioned investments.

Mr S Beggs: We do not mean that in any kind of negative way. We are delighted with those well-intentioned investments.

The Chairperson: In your response, you talked about the creative industries innovation fund failing to meet the needs of the sub-sector. What alternatives do you see to that?

Mr S Beggs: We say throughout the paper and presentation that those investments are very welcome, but you cannot separate high-profile investment in the creative industries from the reduction year on year in the investment in the performing arts and theatre, and the arts in general. To make those existing investments meaningful and sustainable, the foundation on which it is all built cannot be continually eroded.

In the creative industries in particular, current funding models restrict the ability of companies such as ours to export our product by, for example, taking a very successful show to somewhere such as the West End or Broadway. When we have a culturally exportable product, we are not really in a position to apply to Invest NI. Experience from several of our members shows that the creative industries innovation fund will allow for the development of what is currently perceived as product. Charlotte mentioned, for example, the Big Telly Theatre Company's production of 'Puckoon'. When the company contacted CIIF to look at ways in which it could be helped, it was given funding to develop live ads, which were perceived as being a tangible product that could be used to market the work. However, the production itself was not looked on as being a product, and, therefore, the company ended up eating into critical reserves, even reducing them to zero. That was a big risk, and a company the size of the Bruiser Theatre Company, which I manage, would never have been able to afford to take that calculated and qualified risk.

Ms Henry: Understandably, current funding models are supportive of the idea that we create a product for local people. That is a vital and essential part of what we do. However, the idea of risk or creativity with international or export potential is not supported. The system is just not set up to support that. Therefore, naturally, we look to funds such as CIIF, or somewhere such as Invest NI, to take that more venture capital, or risk, approach to investment to enable us to take the product to market. That is not currently open to the performing arts as a critical part of the creative industries.

The Chairperson: Attracting big productions, such as 'Game of Thrones', has been a huge success for Northern Ireland, but what benefits have your members gleaned from that?

Mr S Beggs: There is fluidity between the subsectors of the creative industries. There is no doubt about the significance of a show like that coming to Northern Ireland. For example, David Craig, who was one of the designers on 'Game of Thrones', has been a theatre and opera designer for years. He has worked with Bruiser and at many of the venues in Northern Ireland. For him to get that kind of exposure and to be able to work in that arena on an international platform is fantastic. It also gives the arts and culture sector in Northern Ireland a big, high-profile boost. Those are the sorts of opportunities that our members get from such productions. However — this may sound like our mantra, but we keep emphasising it because it is so important to us — if, in 10 years' time, the indigenous, home-grown performing arts and theatre sector here is eroded, it will not be possible for us to put Northern Ireland professionals into such projects, and they will stop happening.

The Chairperson: Of course, Northern Ireland had great success at the Oscars.

Mr S Beggs: Absolutely. That is the thing. Theatre actress Maggie Cronin, for example, gave a great performance in 'The Shore'. Last week, I saw her performing to a packed audience in the Ulster Hall Group Space at lunchtime. So, while she is winning Oscars, she is also bringing continued enjoyment and enrichment to the cultural lives of people in Belfast. It is a two-way street.

Ms Henry: That is what we mean by interdependence. We absolutely value the visibility and profile of those really big, high-profile events, but, equally, they would not exist without our sector. We are the people who create the actors and the designers who work on those productions and films to allow them to happen in Northern Ireland.

Mr S Beggs: That is what makes them Northern Ireland things, not just something that is parachuted in, with the greatest of respect, at a time when the climate is good for that. If we want those productions to stay when it becomes easier for people to produce them somewhere else, and if we still want to be able to champion our indigenous product here, we have to make sure that the investment in what we have here is maintained.

Mr D Bradley: Thanks very much for your presentation. The Chair mentioned the movement from STEM to STEAM, and drama is now a subject in many schools. You say that creative arts skills should be more embedded across the curriculum. Your paper states:

"For example, bring business thinking into creative education; conducting project based learning requiring entrepreneurship".

Will you expand on what you mean by that?

Ms Henry: At the heart of the risk taking and entrepreneurialism of global successes such as Google and Apple was the idea of where business and science and technology meet art and design. That needs to be embedded at a really early age and embedded in young people's learning, because the success of those businesses was as much about creativity and the fact that you could market them to people and engage with people as it was about the science and technology behind the products. As much as we are saying that the arts need to be stand-alone as a discipline and in the subjects in the curriculum, we are also saying that they must be embedded in how young people learn all of their subjects and in how teachers are trained in delivering those curriculum objectives. For us, the key issues are involvement at an early stage and how teachers come out of our training colleges.

Ms Smith: The notion of risk is really interesting. It is important that younger generations are told that it is OK to take risks and see what happens. That really allows them to let their creativity show. We want entrepreneurs from the younger generation to stand up and be willing to take risks, because a lot of risks pay off.

Ms Henry: Innovation requires creativity. If we want our young people to be innovators, they need to be coming out of school as creative thinkers.

Mr D Bradley: Is it your view that the creative industries fund places too much emphasis on the digital or video aspect of the creative industries and not enough on the more human side?

Mr S Beggs: Absolutely. The fund is very welcome, but it is a fund that funds extras and enables an existing organisation that already produces great work to enhance what it does. However, those enhancements will not mean anything if the organisation disappears. The creative industries innovation fund is brilliant when placed alongside proper core investment in the companies that can apply to that fund.

Ms Henry: It should not be an either/or. One of the richest things that we have in Northern Ireland is our cultural offering and our art. That is what we are recognised for globally. Therefore, is that not the perfect starting point? We should continue to invest in that to create really vibrant creative industries rather than focusing on something that is relatively new to us. We should start from where our strengths are.

Mr S Beggs: Understandably and rightly, everyone gets excited about fantastic things such as 'Game of Thrones' being made here and the MTV Awards coming to Belfast. Those things are extremely exciting and, let us face it, would never have happened 10 years ago. However, we have to ensure that we do not take our eye off the ball. As Eimear says, it is not a case of either/or, although it is completely understandable that people will be more excited by that side of things.

Mr Ó hOisín: You mentioned the centrality of the creative industries and arts sector to life here. I note in your paper that Aideen McGinley, the chief executive of Ilex and the City of Culture in Derry next year, sounds a note of caution as to how best it can be dealt with. Is the industry ready for the remarkable series of events that will happen over the next couple of years? How can you maximise the opportunities and identify the pitfalls that might be presented by those events, which are on top of us already?

Mr S Beggs: We will have those big flagship arts events and arts seasons or festivals. The MTV Awards, for example, were given real legitimacy and Northern Irish character and flavour by the fact that, for every Justin Bieber at a hotel window, there was a parade of local acts, from the high-profile ones such as Snow Patrol right through to those taking part in Belfast Music Week, when every available space in Belfast was crammed with top-quality local events. Our local product interacted with the big, international, high-profile event that came here.

The City of Culture or the Titanic Festival will only become valuable and important when we stop the experience becoming like the experience of going to any city and the high streets all looking exactly the same. What will make those events unique to Northern Ireland is top-quality local product. We are ready to meet those challenges and provide that product. For example, the brochure for the Titanic Festival has just been published, and there is a lot of really great local product in there. If that is not replicated in the north-west next year, that would be a problem.

I do not think that we should be frightened of the profile that those events will bring us, but we need to ensure that we commit to supporting local content in those events.

Mr Ó hOisín: Do we run the risk of overkill over the next couple of years, to the detriment of future development?

Mr S Beggs: I really do not think so. I think it is a time to celebrate and shine a light on what we have here. We have had long enough of the opposite. Far from overkill, this is a time to celebrate.

Mr Ó hOisín: Good; I am glad to hear it.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for your presentation. It was very interesting. You say in your paper that there is a need for the creation of:

"a specific body to cheerlead and advocate for investment in and strategic policy planning on behalf of the Creative industries."

Are you saying that that body should move away from the Arts Council and be totally independent? How would that work, and who do you see running that or funding it or whatever?

Ms Henry: We are not necessarily saying that about the Arts Council at all. We look at Scotland as an interesting model. The success there has been built on by the creation of Creative Scotland and that holistic approach that sees the creative industries as one, including the arts. That is extremely interesting. The situation in Northern Ireland is unique in that the Arts Council has both a funding role and an advocacy role in its relationship with the Department. What we specifically mean by our suggestion is that we need something that is supported by government but comes from us as a sector. It could be something as informal as a platform through which all the different sectors and interest groups could get together, or something more formal, such as an advocacy body through which we could identify the gaps in policy and strategy and work with government to fill them.

Mr McMullan: We talk about Creative Scotland, and we could say the same thing about Creative England or Creative Wales. Are we not a wee bit behind in that we have a creative Northern Ireland and then you have Ireland? In the creative industries, you are battling two here on your own doorstep.

Mr S Beggs: Creative Scotland is unique in the sense that —

Mr McMullan: It is only an example.

Mr S Beggs: Do you mean the pull between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in that respect?

Mr McMullan: Yes.

Mr Stephen Beggs: From our perspective, we have to look at Northern Ireland, because that is where we work and that is the economy and society that we contribute to. We always want to work in partnership with our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland and complement their work. We work quite closely with Theatre Forum, which is based in Dublin and is our equivalent in the Republic. We are bringing the first all-Ireland arts conference to Belfast in June. It will take place in the reopened Lyric Theatre, and practitioners from all over — the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and internationally — will be coming here to look at ways of championing what is happening here in Northern Ireland. We will look at other international models to see how to take that forward and how to capitalise on the brilliant opportunities in 2012 and 2013, and we will look at how, in the long term, we can make prior and existing investment and future potential investment meaningful and sustainable.

Ms Henry: I do not think that it is a pull at all. I think that it puts us in an extremely strong position in terms of market potential and our potential relationships with other parts of the UK and Ireland. That puts us in a unique and positive position. Where there needs to be a greater concentration of working and partnership is at a cross-departmental level within Northern Ireland itself. I think that the key is for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to work in partnership with Invest NI, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education to realise the potential of the creative industries.

Mr McMullan: Do you not agree that there is a difference between here and the South of Ireland as far as the creative industries and funding are concerned? How much funding goes into the creative industries in the South of Ireland? One small example of the difference is that VAT is charged on tickets here but no VAT is charged on tickets in the South of Ireland. There are also benefits for the promotion of the creative industries on television that you do not have here. Are those differences not a pull on resources? That is what I am getting at. Would it not be far better to deal with that aspect to try to create an even playing field? While there is a difference, the bigger players that you are talking about getting in will go where the financial benefits are.

Ms Henry: There are specific financial incentives that the Executive can look at offering to attract that kind of investment. However, the key to the lessons that we can learn both from Ireland and Scotland is the holistic approach. The real advantage for both Scotland and Ireland has come from looking at how they can support the growth of the creative industries at a cross-departmental level. Part of that will obviously involve financial incentives, but the solution is more about the strategies that cross over education, employment and learning, economic investment and our culture and arts offering.

Mrs McKevitt: It is good to see you again. You mentioned the global recognition that we have in the culture and arts sector. Do the creative industries have any plans to play a lead role in the forthcoming commemorations? For example, are there any plans to use theatre, dramas, plays or films in those celebrations?

Mr S Beggs: Lots of our members are very actively involved in those areas. A good example is the involvement in the Titanic commemorations. One of our members, Kabosh, is heavily involved in a lot of the activities for the Titanic commemorations and has been working in partnership with the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum on its Titanic exhibition and with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on developing the Belfast Bred tour. It is very much about tapping into and using theatre and the creative industries to cross over with cultural tourism and put that unique, characterful local product into those events. It is also about crossing over between the different bodies and forming partnerships that can really maximise the potential of the performing arts to contribute to those celebrations.

Mrs McKevitt: So you think there is the potential to give arts and culture a boost.

Mr S Beggs: I do; absolutely. As we were saying earlier, it is a very exciting time of opportunity and potential. At a time when a lot of other areas of public life seem so dark, we have an opportunity.

Ms Smith: It is also a wonderful opportunity to showcase the amazing productions in Northern Ireland. There will be so many people coming from abroad, and for them to see what we are doing on a cultural and artistic level is a fantastic opportunity.

Mrs McKeivitt: You talked about the younger generation and taking risks. On the issue of open days in schools and performances given, particularly the one by Friends' School Lisburn, which is on YouTube, is that something that you support for the future?

Mr S Beggs: Absolutely. That example is interesting, because it was, I think, an ex-pupil of Friends' School who came to the school with the proposal. It was risk-taking both in the manner in which it was filmed, if you were one of the parents watching it, and because it was put on YouTube, which makes it terribly public. It has been a massive success for them. It was very risky, but very creative and innovative. That school fosters a culture of that kind of activity. The performing arts and theatre industry here stand shoulder to shoulder with film-making and online innovations. They are all part of the same exciting environment that we find ourselves in.

Ms Henry: Yesterday, I was at a youth theatre conference in Belfast. One of the keynote speakers said that, at a conference that he attended a couple of weeks ago, a leading consultant in England said that his experience of the arts and youth theatre when growing up was as much of a contributor to making him a good surgeon today as were the years of medical training. We passionately believe that creativity in the arts makes for better teachers, better doctors, better nurses and better people.

Mr S Beggs: That was someone who had no intention, necessarily, of becoming an actor. He just had the opportunity to be exposed to that kind of activity early in life. He said that he believed that that was a key part of his development and that it enabled him to have empathy and to connect with his patients and colleagues. It also helped with the public speaking required in the advocacy of his sector.

Mrs McKeivitt: I have nothing to say other than that I really enjoyed your presentation. It was very informative. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: I was privy to Mrs McKeivitt's performance a couple of weeks ago at the Newry drama festival.

Mr S Beggs: Excellent.

Ms Henry: That is what we like to hear.

Mr Irwin: I apologise that I had to leave for a few minutes during your presentation. Forgive me if I ask a question that has already been asked. I was interested to hear Eimear saying that young people need to take risks. I agree that that is important. I think that young people can be imaginative, whether in the arts, the creative industries or even in business. Young people take risks, and I know from experience in business that, if the risk is not too high, people can be very successful when it works out for them. What kind of support do you believe should be given to our creative industries to exploit international markets?

Mr S Beggs: It would be very interesting to be able to explore a partnership between Invest NI and the Arts Council to help the industry to export its product. We talked earlier about the current problem tending to be that the production itself, such as a play, is not seen as a product or an exportable asset. We mentioned the creative industries innovation fund and Big Telly Theatre Company's production of 'Puckoon' — the Spike Milligan adaptation that was very successful in the West End. The creative industries innovation fund was available to fund the project that produced a live ads package to go with that, but it did not provide funding for the production itself. We need to regard a production as having as much potential as exporting a car, or whatever. That would be a very interesting way for Departments to work together to look at ways of maximising that potential, especially in light of the hugely exciting things that have come into Northern Ireland. It would be great to be able to look at ways of taking those exciting things back out again.

Mr Hilditch: Thanks very much for your presentation. Many of your figures are based on central government support and funding. Further to Karen's point, much good work goes on at community level on productions reflecting a number of centenaries this year. Many councils are subsidising town hall productions again. Have you taken that into account in your presentation?

Mr S Beggs: Absolutely. It is as much about increasing co-operation between local authorities and arm's-length bodies such as the Arts Council as it is about central support from DCAL. In Northern Ireland, the most successful and legitimate events, for which the people take ownership, happen when they all work together. It is very heartening to see local authorities taking that role, but I do not think that we would advocate that they should do it instead; it should be done together. It should not be a matter of either/or. It sounds like we are saying that a lot, but that is when it works best.

Mr Hilditch: At the other end of the scale, you mentioned a figure of £16 million in ticket sales. Given the economic situation in which we find ourselves, have you found that to be a level playing field or is attendance going down?

Mr S Beggs: Encouragingly, the picture is surprisingly buoyant. Venues and production companies are working very hard to make events as affordable as possible. Most of the tickets for the Belfast Children's Festival, which opens next week, are on sale for £5 or £6. In fact, the £6 tickets are the most expensive.

Ms Henry: My company, Replay, has a show in that festival. We are the first local company to appear on the main stage at the Lyric Theatre, and we have children coming from all across Northern Ireland. In fact, we had to add additional shows. The key to that is that we were lucky enough to secure private investment to offer free transport: if the schools could pay for their tickets, we could get them to the theatre. That is an example of our being innovative and working with government and private investment. As long as we keep access open, the demand for what we do will continue.

The Chairperson: I have a quick final question on your submission. You mention that you are launching a series of bursaries for technical and production crew this year. Are you doing that in collaboration with anyone else? How are those being funded?

Mr S Beggs: We are terribly proud that it is through our funding from the Arts Council.

Ms Henry: A lottery grant.

Mr S Beggs: Instead of parachuting in training, whereby someone is paid quite a lot to get on a plane and come from somewhere else, we will use the amazing pool of professionals whom we mentioned. Those are the people who can train up our young people and emerging professionals. We put out a call to our own membership, which covers just about every venue and production company in Northern Ireland, and asked whether they would be in position to host one of those bursaries. The bursaries are not cosmetic; they are not work-experience placements. Well, they are to an extent, but the young people are not there just to photocopy and make the tea. We told members that they would have to mentor the young people, agree a series of aims and objectives and provide real hands-on training in a particular area.

Then, we put out a call to emerging professionals through many of the networks to which we have access through the universities and colleges. We asked a board member who co-ordinates an emerging professionals working group, which involves lots of small unfunded companies and individuals working away and developing what they do, to spread the word that this opportunity was coming up. We interviewed the candidates and selected four young people for the placements. Who are the hosts, Charlotte?

Ms Smith: The hosts are MAC, Big Telly Theatre Company, Kabosh Theatre Ltd and Cahoots NI. It is important to highlight the fact that there was huge demand from members willing to host placements. I was really impressed by how many of our members wanted to help the sector to grow. After interviewing the young people, we had to make incredibly hard decisions, because so many of them had the enthusiasm, passion and basic skill set and were on their way to an amazing career in the theatre. It is wonderful that they will be trained up. We just have to retain them in Northern Ireland.

Ms Henry: The demand was six times higher than the number of places that we could fund. That is illustrative of the number of people coming out of third-level education who want to get into employment. We need to create the opportunities to retain them in Northern Ireland. The young people who come out with skills need to be taken to the next level for them to be employable on a long-term basis.

Mr S Beggs: Four is small number of bursaries, but it is a pilot scheme, and we would love to be able to develop it over the next few years. One placement is with MAC, where, through a series of big events, the young person will learn how a venue works with companies coming in and out. The other three placements involve, for example, going on tour with projects. In fact, Cahoots NI's tour will go beyond Northern Ireland to England, and the person will be paid at the recommended Equity rate while on placement. So the young people will be trained and paid at the same time. The host company is paid a small amount to cover the mentoring time. Also, it is not just another scheme asking people to work for free. We believe that it will offer a real return on investment.

The Chairperson: It is a fantastic example of the sector working for itself.

Mr S Beggs: That is it exactly.

Ms Henry: With a small level of investment from the Arts Council.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. It has been a very informative session, and we hope to see you again soon.

Mr S Beggs: Thank you very much. It has been much appreciated.