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Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Performing Arts: Briefing from The Talent
Tribe

30 May 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Michael McGimpsey
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Ms Fedelma Harkin	The Talent Tribe
Mr Paul Simpson	The Talent Tribe

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Fedelma Harkin, director of the Talent Tribe, and Paul Simpson, a member of the advisory panel. This briefing is being reported by Hansard. Whoever is going to give the presentation, feel free to do that.

Ms Fedelma Harkin (The Talent Tribe): On behalf of the Talent Tribe, I want to say a very big thank you for the opportunity. It is appreciated. Paul will set the scene for us.

Mr Paul Simpson (The Talent Tribe): I will kick off with a short opening statement, and then we can move on to the meat of it. Fedelma, with her background in the Talent Tribe, approached me about two years ago. My background is in the Civil Service; I am retired. She came to me with a very strong vision that something needed to be done on education and training in the creative industries, based on her long years of experience. I agreed to see what we could do to help out. That is why I am here. I do not bring any knowledge of the business. My experience is on the government side of the picture; Fedelma is the expert.

So what we have been doing for the past couple of years is working to try to get government support for our diagnosis of the problem; we think there is a serious problem. The idea is to create some sort of creative industries school of excellence in Northern Ireland. Our experience so far has been that government support for the creative industries is, frankly, fragmented and unco-ordinated. I am saying that as an ex-civil servant who has been on the other side, but it is definitely the case. In a way, it is not surprising that that is the case, because, in the creative industries, as you know very well, there are a very diverse range of activities included within that general label, and there are great differences between the various strands. Nevertheless, it is frustrating for us. We have found it very frustrating, trying to get a handle on who we deal with and who has the power to make something happen.

We were very glad to see, in your recent report, a clear recognition from the Committee that there is a need for greater co-ordination. I notice that you endorsed the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

(DCAL) proposal, in its draft collaborative framework, for a ministerial advisory group. Fedelma and I think that that is really needed. We also think that a group led by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is needed to bring the necessary authority to bear and to get the levels of co-ordination that are required across a number of Departments.

Our principal interest in all of this is to ensure that young people in Northern Ireland have the opportunity to become part of the creative industries here. I do not need to tell you, because you know very well, that Northern Ireland is fast developing a worldwide reputation in the field. It is frustrating to see major production companies, for example, coming to Northern Ireland, and being willing to spend money and do a lot in Northern Ireland, but having to bring performing and backroom staff with them because they cannot get the talent in Northern Ireland. That is a glorious opportunity missed, as far as we are concerned, because we cannot provide staff who are trained in the way in which the industry wants them to be trained. I notice that the Committee also recognised that in its report. I notice that you quoted Creative and Cultural Skills as saying that there was overwhelming written and oral evidence pointing to the fact that there are significant skills shortages and, indeed, skills development shortages within the creative industries here. That very much reflects our experience, particularly Fedelma's experience in working out there with the talent.

The universities and FE colleges undoubtedly carry out a great deal of good work in the area. They offer all sorts of stuff that is very good, but we feel that there is a lack of relevant project-based practical skills, which young people can demonstrate in their portfolios and bring to the table when they are looking for employment. That is the message coming strongly from the industry. They would much rather have people with practical skills than academic qualifications, and that has been our experience.

Now is the time to step up a gear, move to the next level and take the opportunity, now that it is there, to create a Northern Ireland school of excellence. Call it whatever you like, but it would be basically a school of excellence in the creative industries. It would complement the work of existing FE and HE bodies but focus on giving young people the practical skills that the creative industries are crying out for. That is my opening statement.

Ms Harkin: I am sort of recycled coming into the Talent Tribe. I am basing this experience on 17 years working with talented, creative young people in the education system and alongside it. I cannot emphasise enough the power of performance. I think that 17 years working directly with them and then 18 years in the industry as a senior producer at the BBC has positioned me to move with the Talent Tribe into engaging so that we are at the coalface testing models and working with young people.

I know that the model works. One of my former students was Geraldine Hughes. She lived in an interface area, and I wonder what would have happened to Geraldine had she not had the platform for her creativity. She would say that to you as well. I believe that Northern Ireland Theatre Association has presented to you. Emma Jordan was one of those; she is one of mine, too.

We have the evidence to support what we say because we are actively on the ground doing this. I could keep you here all afternoon with case studies of young people that evidence that. Our schools and third-level institutions do an amazing job developing the academic side of all this. We are fortunate to have them, and they do try to make it more relevant to the industry, but, as Paul said, the industry that I have been part of for 18 years wants evidence. If you walk into me or any theatre company, they are looking for your CV and whether you have a showreel. They want to see you doing it. We need training for young people who have creative intelligence. There is more than just academic intelligence out there. We have the talent to supply the creative industry that government are building here.

How do you get into the creative industry? What if one of your children wanted to get into the industry? It is a hard-to-buy industry, so we need a pathway. If one of your children wants to be a lawyer or a doctor, there are direct pathways for them, and schools are good at that. What is the pathway for the creative industries? They are also talking about creative intelligence. There is a creative economy that we can build using that creative intelligence. How many academics do we need? How many creative people do we need? Can we blend the two? Thinking of transferable skills, what business would not jump at the chance to have an imaginative, creative and innovative member of staff? That is the basis of our industry and training.

We also need to get into the word that Paul used — "excellence". You can have excellence focusing on creative intelligence. You can put those two words in one sentence. You can have "community"

and "excellence", putting those words together. Geraldine may be winding down in the White House now, but who was interested in her when she was in an interface area? There is an absolute mine of diamonds out there. I know, because we are interfacing day in and day out with young people whose literacy may be visual and their imagery technical. There is all of that.

The Talent Tribe has been working to test the training models. Paul and I have been trying it out. Our mantra is that the industry must train for the industry. The industry is moving at such a rate of knots that it is the people in the industry who have to keep up with it. We are using that sort of model. They are also the people who will harvest the people who are being trained. We believe that these creative and innovative skills are needed for every sector. It is about building a creative economy. We have talked to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). The CBI is very much encouraging us to involve it by training the young people in business, and training them to be employers as well as employees.

We are engaged in collaboration with Training for Women Network (TWN), working with eight groups of disengaged young people from around Northern Ireland — young women, in this case — to give them a voice and engage with them through a gateway to progression that is funded by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). We are training them in creative industry areas, and it is proving really successful. I can supply you with the evidence of that if you want further information. We are working with TWN as a lead partner in the administration of that. TWN has the background in the management of money, and it is very good. We are also using TWN as a way in. It is very interested in young people going forward.

We are working with TWN on a project that is a model of the main third-level project that we have talked about. In that project, we are engaging with disadvantaged but very talented young people. I get really frustrated when people keep looking at me as if I am some sort of cross between Mother Teresa and Mary Poppins. I am not; I am out there because I know that there is real talent that has an edge and that has something to offer but is not being exploited. We are working with TWN on that so that we can test that creative industries model.

The real issue is that we need a platform for them to learn, so another area that we have been working on and talking to DCAL about is creating, so that we engage with young people who would not think of the creative industries, a sports channel made by young people for young people so that they learn the skills. That is using the infrastructures that are out there: football clubs, GAA clubs, rugby clubs, and everything else. They can learn new skills and build up — we are talking about excellence here. I am not talking about a community video about which people say, "Isn't it nice that they did that?" I have a grandson who is appearing as 'The Winslow Boy' in the Old Vic in London. He is not doing a community performance; he is a professional. The bar is set high for these young people. In 17 years, my problem has never been encouraging them. My problem is keeping up once they have been given the opportunity. I am sure that Emma Jordan did not leave you in any doubt when she made her presentation.

I see that sports channel as an opportunity for us to engage with the STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — agenda and, as the Arts Council would like to have it, the STEAM — science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics — agenda. In it there are all the technical skills and mathematical skills, but there is also the opportunity for journalistic skills. You can have quizzes, dramas and anything that we choose to make. We have been talking to the BBC about a documentary examining all the money that the Government are putting into the three stadiums. There is a great interest there. That is all stuff that we are moving forward with, and it will give young people a portfolio of work. We are doing the same in theatre, and we do not think that the two can be separated. We believe that performing arts has to be the centrepiece. What is on the stage and in front of camera is as important as what is behind the stage and behind the camera. We need to create that industry. Where will our new companies come from? You guys have an opportunity, and it is a heavy one. I really think that your decision can help to inspire our future generation, and I wish you well with it.

Mr Simpson: I hope that you received our written submission. You may have had a chance to have a look at that. We will not bore you with the detail of that now, as you can read it yourselves. However, as Fedelma keeps saying, at its heart is the fact that we are looking for ways and means of making the skills that the kids build up practical and relevant to the industry now. I cannot say strongly enough that we want those skills not to be academically based but practically based. The model is all about that

If the Committee agrees with the analysis that we have set out, we will be very grateful for any support that you can offer, particularly in encouraging the Culture Minister to take the next step. The next step

that we have in mind is a fairly modest one. All that we are looking for at this stage is some modest funding to pay for a business case. If there is support, in principle, for the idea of having a school of excellence of some kind in Northern Ireland, we need to then work out in detail exactly what that means and what dimensions, including costs, need to be explored. We are trying to get the Culture Minister to fund a business case to take it to the next stage.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much. Have you had any discussions with DCAL up to now?

Mr Simpson: Yes; we have had discussions with DCAL and DEL. It is fair to say that DCAL has been broadly supportive of our proposals so far. We have had discussions with the Arts Council and NI Screen, who are also supportive. I have to say that DEL was not quite as enthusiastic. Its attitude seems to be, "What is wrong with the training that is being provided currently?" Its attitude is, "DCAL is setting the policy. DEL is delivering it. What is the problem?" I do not need to repeat that we think that there is a big problem.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much for your presentation. We have come a considerable way in the creative industries in Northern Ireland in recent years. However, I was concerned to hear you say, Paul, that support for the creative industries is fragmented and not co-ordinated. Is it a problem of getting joined-upness across Departments such as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, DEL and DCAL?

I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. Belfast City Council has been very supportive. Indeed, it has a creative industries officer in Brendan McGoran, who is an excellent fellow who does great work.

Mr Simpson: Yes, I know.

Mr Humphrey: To be fair, other councils may not have that resource. However, what sort of support do you get from other councils? Do you think that the review of public administration (RPA) will provide you with an opportunity because it will create super-councils that will have greater resource and, therefore, no excuse?

Mr Simpson: There is evident fragmentation and lack of co-ordination on the departmental side. DCAL has the policy lead, in theory. However, in many cases, DCAL finds its hands tied because, to progress projects with multiple funding streams, it has to get buy-in from other Departments, which is very difficult. As I said at the beginning, the creation of a ministerial advisory group would give some muscle to that and help in that regard. On the other side of the coin — and Fedelma can probably speak more to this than me — the industry is undoubtedly fragmented. People sometimes talk about herding cats to try to get a single voice out of the industry. It is very difficult, and that has to be worked at as well. The opportunities with local government reform are close to my heart because my last job in government was in the Department of the Environment, leading local government reform on the RPA and the super-councils. I have always been very keen on more delegation of functions from Departments out to councils. You asked about the hope that councils could provide some sort of initiative, and, realistically, it will probably be years before they are in a position to do that. As you say, at the minute, Belfast is the only council that has enough financial muscle to do anything significant.

Mr Humphrey: RPA was a follow-on point. Do any councils currently support that?

Mr Simpson: Fedelma could probably say more than I could on that.

Ms Harkin: We have done work, particularly with Magherafelt council. You get fragmented project work. There is no continuum and no way of trying to build that into a strategy because it is fragmented. You go in and do a project. We have done projects in Lurgan, and what happens is you build up and engage with young people and motivate them, and you get incredible stuff. I have DVDs that would astound you, but once that funding pocket goes, so does the idea. That is the problem with it.

Mr Simpson: Sustaining it is the issue.

Ms Harkin: It is.

Mr Humphrey: The problem at Stormont is the lack of joined-upness. Have you any thoughts on how that might be addressed?

Mr Simpson: I believe that DCAL and the Minister need a clearer remit on leading than they have now, and the creation of a ministerial advisory group would give great strength to that. That has to be a starting point.

Mr Humphrey: I used to chair the development committee in City Hall. There is a difficulty in trying to get everybody on the same page and saying the same thing. Is work being done to address that? We had some folk in last week who are working to try to do that, but it is difficult. I know that you accept that.

Mr Simpson: Yes, it is difficult.

Mr Humphrey: There is also the difficulty that, to be honest, not all elected representatives and councils are as supportive of the arts as others. Given the double-dip recession and the state of the economy, there are those pressures as well.

Mr Simpson: There is a dimension of "build it and they will come". Part of the reason why it is difficult to get co-operation from the industry at the minute is that it does not see anything in it for it. If we are able at least to offer the potential of something such as a school of excellence, the industry will come together more than it currently does because it will be united in a common objective.

Mrs McKeivitt: Thanks very much for your presentation. William mentioned some of the stuff that I was going to talk about, such as RPA. One of your quotes was that the industry must train for industry. One of the standout issues from the Committee's inquiry was the lack of careers guidance in schools and at what level the creative industries should be introduced to schools so that children can prepare. Maths is a subject that could be well used in the creative industries. What is your opinion on that? Have you talked to the Education Department about it? You talked about young people and the lost generation. When I was at school, nobody encouraged us to go into the performing arts or any type of arts. In fact, we were told that, if we did, the only thing that we would be able to draw would be the buroo.

Ms Harkin: They still say that.

Mrs McKeivitt: Are we able to do anything for the elderly, and introducing older people? With the times we are in and the job losses that are in it, maybe there is an opportunity to reskill them. Do you have anything to offer on that?

Ms Harkin: We are working with Bryson House to develop a 50-plus scheme at the moment. I still nearly refer to a 50-year-old as a youngster. One of our advisory committee members, Dame Geraldine Keegan, has been really helpful in looking at the whole career structure. The problem is that there is not one at the moment. Paul and I were talking about that this morning. If you are training to be a doctor, there is academic training, but you need a big teaching hospital. However, the problem is that a lot of our industry is made up of small groups, so how do they generate that on their own? I can give you an example that relates to schools. There will be a reticence. If any of our children went into school and said, "I want to do German and art," and the school said that the timetables clashed, we all know which subject it would encourage them to take. So, there is an issue there. It is difficult, however, because it is so fragmented for careers departments.

Let me give you a very simple example. Let us say that we use the industry to provide training, that the school is in existence, and that some young people have shot a film — this is a training film, not the film we are talking about for their showreel — they will need a platform for that, where they churn out and apply the skills that they have learned, because no employer in the creative industries will take a Queen's film as an example of work. So, let us take one of our best-known post-production houses here: Yellow Moon. If I phone Greg and say, "I want one of your AVID suites for three months. You are going to edit the film, and I want these three editors as mentors", and the young team then go in there, do the stuff and get mentored, that will put money into the industry. Greg might then say, "If I have three months' work, I will buy a suite", and that will generate more work. So, the school would be investing in that company. It means that he, then, is saying, "Listen, there is a kid down here who is amazing, and we think that you should have a look at him". Not only that, if that kid goes out to make

a cup of tea, he might see work on 'Game of Thrones' taking place in the next edit suite. So, those young people are actually in the industry that is harvesting them.

The only people who will ever keep up with the speed of how things are changing technically are those in the industry. They have to keep up with that, and they can afford to do so. So, young people are, by osmosis, taking in that stuff, because they are dealing with people who are really talented and who love that business. They are learning the right attitude, too, because they see it happening and see what it takes to be in the industry.

Mr Simpson: Can I ask, Fedelma, to directly answer Karen's point about the adequacy or otherwise of the careers advice structure in schools at the minute, it is definitely deficient, is it not?

Ms Harkin: It is, very. Geraldine said that she would not even know where to start because there is no defined path. What I maybe did not say clearly enough to you is that there has to be collaboration. If the industry did not collaborate, it would not work. So, this is about collaboration.

You have all these things happening, and it is almost like there is a wheel there, but there needs to be a hub that pulls all those things together and interfaces with them. If we had that, together, we would be stronger, and we would almost have a Northern Ireland plc here. We are already talking about this school, and we are already talking to people about being affiliated with Sundance and Tribeca, because, in the industry, those are really highly accredited, acclaimed brands. When you start to tie that in with schools, there is a path and there is a necessity for this school to design a pathway for young creative people.

Mrs McKeivitt: Maybe we will touch on how social media has taken off with younger people, and the advantage of that. I saw one example of a school open day where, instead of being given the traditional book and literature about the school, as had been the case for the previous 10 years, Friends' School in Lisburn put a film about the school, with the theme music of 'Friends', on social media. I am now at the stage of looking at new schools with my children, and you are better sitting and watching the children doing something physically rather than reading about it. Do you think that there is an opportunity there for the creative industries?

Ms Harkin: Yes, there is a big opportunity, and you make a very good point. I did not mention that we already have a relationship with schools, particularly at first level. We recently did a whole project based on that with Coláiste Feirste on the Falls Road. We brought the industry into the school. The pupils made an advertisement, and followed exactly how the industry did it. The mentors who went in do this for a living, and it was really interesting as a taster. The pupils were learning by doing. Do it, and they will remember; do it, and they will engage. They had a ball. I can tell you that one girl in that group could organise the World Police and Fire Games for you now, already; she is incredible.

Mrs McKeivitt: Did she work on the advertisement?

Ms Harkin: She was a production manager on the ad. They, literally, had their own production team. They were mentored, but they do it and are trained. I am telling you now that I have seen worse than they made transmitted on UTV. It was really good.

Mr Humphrey: I note that you did not mention the BBC.

Ms Harkin: No, we do not put ads out. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ó hOisín: I declare an interest as having been one of the first trainees on the Irish language broadcasting fund quite a few years ago and I went on to fund a community-based television company in the Magherafelt area that is still producing to this day. It has produced everything over the years, from community DVD projects to professional films and series of films for the likes of RTE, UTV and the BBC. So, I have some background in that.

In fairness, Fedelma, the issue is the gap between community projects and the professional productions, and the funding for those. In my time, it was a hand-to-mouth existence as you pitched for small pots of funding from a wide variety of sources. It was hit and miss, and you got occasional funding. It was a very tenuous existence. I also worked with Geraldine Keegan, by the way.

Ms Harkin: She is a star.

Mr Ó hOisín: Tell her I was asking for her.

The issue of the gap in the middle must be addressed. To an extent, the industry does not lend itself to addressing that gap, because it will cherry-pick the most talented people. They will be brought in on short schemes or short mentoring, and that goes on across the board. So, it may be that there needs to be something there that has to be a bit more secure and will attract people into the industry. I also agree with Karen; I have experience of the Roe Valley schools partnership in my constituency and one of the participants is the artistic-based Limavady High School. It starts kids young, and the annual plays, films or whatever they produce are huge and of a quality of which others can only dream.

You are right in what you said about technology. When I was training, Final Cut Pro was the bee's knees. Now, it is like a Model T Ford when it comes to editing.

Ms Harkin: AVID and it keep bypassing each other.

Mr Ó hOisín: They do. This was probably one of the original versions of Final Cut Pro — in black and white.

I am just saying that the gap has to be identified. You are right about the interface stuff. Just before you came in, we discussed the June monitoring round, and there is quite a substantial sum in that to deal with poverty and social exclusion. I am sure there is some leeway or latitude to get that. The film and television industries in particular need to be looking at the way in which they deal with people and encourage talent, because I believe that the talent is there. I have seen it.

Ms Harkin: I think the talent is coming out in spite of us.

Mr Ó hOisín: Exactly.

Ms Harkin: I have a grandson who is 17 and who already has an American agent: his family did that. That is the reality. This really makes me angry. I have a son who is a film editor, and I could lift a phone, and that is not right. It also gives a voice to people who can afford it at the moment. If you are affluent, you can afford to send your young people to England and all the rest of it. Therefore, that whole section of the media theatre is dominated by the middle class, and that for me is frightening, because there is no voice, particularly for young people. They might say things that we might not want to hear at times, but there is a real fear that if we do not engage and do something about it we are not supporting the industry that you are talking about. You have put your finger on the button on so many issues there.

Mr Ó hOisín: The potential is there — the economic potential, certainly.

Ms Harkin: It is huge.

Mr Ó hOisín: I saw it with the broadcasting fund during the time when Michael McGimpsey was Minister. It was just kicking off at that point, and it is still going. I have seen the number of people who are involved in it across the board. They may not be in full-time employment but they have realised other things through that and some potential that they have or their community has as well. I agree with everything that both of you have said this morning, but it does need tied up and tied together.

Ms Harkin: It does. The thing that you are looking at — the school training — is another hub, and it would have to become the responsibility of schools to engage with the industry. We have done a lot of sessions. Colin Anderson has chaired sessions for us with the industry. There have been heated debates where you get a company — I will not name names — that says, "When someone comes to me, I want to see their showreel and I want to see what they can do. I run a business. I am not interested. Do that worthy stuff and all the rest of it, but this is what I want. I want excellence coming through the door; I want to be able to use them, because without that, I will not get the commissions." They are small companies, and because they explode into production and then come down again, it can be quite difficult. It is a challenge, but they are passionate about what they do and they were all given a chance by someone else. I have people coming up to me in restaurants saying, "I know what you are doing for kids. Put my name down and I will help."

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Thanks for the presentation. I commend the work that you are doing. It sounds like a really good thing to be doing, and very worthwhile. I know that one of the major focuses of the Minister is to reach the socially disadvantaged in all aspects of her remit, so I know that that would be important in this regard. You mentioned the dominance of the middle classes, and we know that. How do you reach those people who fall below the radar and just do not get that encouragement or opportunity to rise or come forward? You mentioned Coláiste Feirste. How are you engaging with the Irish-language community?

Ms Harkin: Talent Tribe has been in existence for just over four years. We have been putting out feelers, treading and learning by doing things ourselves, in some ways, so we have been, and are, in further discussion about doing other work based on that. That was a pilot when we were working with Active Communities. That has been successful and we are building on that.

The creative industries school is the third level, which is what we are aiming for. The Talent Tribe is in existence to engage with disadvantaged young people who have not had the opportunities so that we can build them to a level where they can compete. So, by the time the creative industries school happens, there will be kids ready to move on, and they will be going in with a showreel.

We are doing some work with young people who have autism, and we handed a camera to a young fella who, from the moment he took it, framed better than a lot of the BBC crews I have worked with. That was probably because he spent most of his life in a room: he just did it instinctively. If you get someone like that and start to work with them creatively, the potential is enormous. We are actively trying to build in that way, because it is so important that it does not become a middle-class preserve of the theatre-going classes and that it engages with people and brings an audience to the theatre that would not normally go there.

The young people I worked with all those years ago, including Emma and Geraldine, formed a theatre company, which opened in the Opera House and toured Ireland. Its final performance was in the Olivier Theatre in the National Theatre in front of 2,500, predominantly English, people who gave them a standing ovation. There were 35 "failures" of the 11-plus who staged that, most of who now work in the industry. So, the evidence was there even then. We brought in experts from the industry at the time.

So, as far as the reference side goes, my whole background was in working with kids who lacked opportunity and would be seen as academic failures but had a creative intelligence that left me in awe.

Ms McCorley: When you did that work with Coláiste Feirste, had you been actively seeking out the Irish-language community?

Ms Harkin: We had been talking to it. We are trying to set up collaboration, and in Northern Ireland, that can be quite difficult. However, we always work with the community. We had been working with the women's group on the Falls Road, somebody spoke to somebody and all of a sudden we got a call. That is how it came about. We want to engage with anyone we can who is interested in taking this forward.

Ms McCorley: Women's centres are generally good places to reach out because they have mothers there who have the necessary interest in the children's lives. A lot of the people who engage in women's centres are single parents, so you would probably reach a lot of very disadvantaged people in them.

Ms Harkin: We have been in Windsor Women's Centre for four years, and we already have an eight-year-old there who has made four films. We also have a wee one from Sandy Row who was in Terry George's last film. It is fascinating to watch the effect that that has on the rest of the groups, because all of a sudden it is, "Wait a minute, Brooke did that. She is one of us. We can do it." We actively seek work for them, so quite a few of them have amazing CVs.

Ms McCorley: Would Kenneth Branagh have made it if his parents had stayed in Belfast?

Ms Harkin: Geraldine Hughes's parents are still here.

Ms McCorley: Yes, it is hard to know.

Mr Simpson: Liam Neeson made it.

Ms Harkin: That is right. We have to stop thinking into ourselves. This is a global industry, and a lot of it is based in America. We interface with a group called the Global Arts Corps, so our kids have already been working with American film-makers. It was through them that we got the contacts with Tribeca. We need to look outside, because we have an awful lot to offer. I am pushing at open doors everywhere, especially in America. It is incredible. We have had intense masterclasses with ensembles of young people from ages eight to 19, working together as an ensemble with a group. We work organically, so that we use all their scripts. We do not put on shows such as 'Oliver!' It is done through storytelling.

It is amazing to hear some of their stories. It is absolutely incredible. I have to tell you this. One of the best ones was at the Global Arts Corps, where we had a boy of 10 who is going on 90. Some of the group were from affluent backgrounds, and some were from very deprived areas such as Whiterock and Windsor. There was a mixture of kids. They did not care; they did not see, because talent was their key and they could see that the others were talented. They were working with professional film and theatre people. The project was based on 'Re-imaging Belfast'. That was what the script was going to be.

An affluent 10-year-old said, "I think that we should keep the peace walls in a new Belfast." — Eleanor from Windsor Women's Centre would shout at me, because I say "working class" and she says "There is no work, so stop calling it the working class." You could see that the kids from working class areas were asking "What?" Michael, the producer, asked him why he wanted the peace walls. And he said, "They are reminders of our violent past". Everyone was stunned, and Michael said, "Tell me about your violent past". This wee one drew himself up to his full height and said "I am really surprised at you, Michael, that you have not heard of the Vikings." *[Laughter.]* Our middle classes do not know, you see. It was very interesting to watch the discussion that followed.

Mr McMullan: How do you hope to reach out to deprived rural areas? In those areas, the creative industries have not been a high priority for councils. There is talent out there, because you see it through local groups, etc, youth clubs, and so on. How do you plan to get out? All your talk today — and very enthusiastic it is — has been about the inner cities.

Ms Harkin: I agree that the projects I referred to have been in city areas. We are trying to tell people that we are here. Part of the problem is that there is no infrastructure for us, too. How do you find people who are genuinely interested? We have been out; we have done work in Magherafelt and Swatragh. In that area, we did a huge project with 167 primary school kids which was very successful. They got Peace III funding for it, so we went in with them on that. We are looking for people to collaborate with. If you put us in touch with anyone, we will certainly engage. We are now working in Castlederg and we have been asked to come back to Lurgan again. We did a very successful project there with young people. So, my answer to you is that if we can find people who are willing to work with us, we will be there.

Mr Simpson: Frankly, we also need more talent drives. We need a number of organisations, such as Fedelma's, feeding in across Northern Ireland, but they need to have a focus. They need to know that there is something to feed into and that there is an endpoint. Thus, the idea of the school. In a sense, there is a chicken-and-egg aspect to the problem. If you create a school of excellence, you will begin to get all of that following on behind. People will have an incentive to do those kinds of things.

Ms Harkin: We put out feelers. We have quite an extensive mailing list. An awful lot of it comes at the moment, because everything is so fragmented in the community. There is sometimes a misunderstanding of what we do. We are not trying to do community video. We are talking about a professional level. We are just about to do a thing in Lurgan where the Hole in the Wall Gang will be the mentors and make a film with them. Damon, who will produce that, and Michael, are both Oscar-nominated. The kids are really engaging. However, it is not a film simply for the rest of the community to work with. We are working with Omniplex, because we need somewhere to show the stuff.

Mr Simpson: Mr Humphrey asked about RPA and the new super-councils. Building that infrastructure is something that the new super-councils could take on to get that kind of focus for taking forward the initiatives at local level.

Mr McMullan: You would need to get that into the community plans now.

Mr Simpson: Yes.

Mr McMullan: I suggest you talk to NILGA, which is the governing body of all councils. That could be a way of talking to one group, which could then feed that out, because every council is represented on NILGA.

Mr Simpson: That is a good point.

Mr McMullan: You talked about the young boy with autism. Those young people are getting trained up, etc. Are there specific courses for working with special needs? Disability and special needs are two different items. Are there courses or modules or whatever for people to —

Ms Harkin: We try to include them. If it is with a group that engages with us or has autism as its core activity, we will engage with that. We have a 14-year-old whom the BBC is writing into a series. It thinks that he is amazing; he is comedy. We cannot keep him out. Every time we turn round, he is with us. Unfortunately, however, he is clearing the roof of the school to get in. He has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and all sorts of issues. He is in with young people who do not have those issues.

Mr McMullan: Where is he based?

Ms Harkin: That wee fella is from Poleglass.

Mr McMullan: That is the problem. I will not dwell on this much longer, but the big problem is getting out into the dispersed rural areas. You have —

Ms Harkin: I agree.

Mr McMullan: — an audience out there. I know that it is not an easy job for you to do.

Ms Harkin: That is why we started talking to the Training for Women Network. We are trying to find infrastructures to go through. I remember being in a community before I went into the industry, and so many people from the industry told me what I needed. I swore that, whatever we did, we would not do that. We want partners, and when we find partners that are up for it, we will go for it.

We have young people who are part of our groups, and the group would not know that they spend part of their time in Donard and have real mental health issues. We have young people with physical disabilities, but they are talented. We make sure, in our policies and all the rest of it, that we engage.

Mr McMullan: Yes. Having policies and engaging is fine. We have had that before. In reality, however, there is no evidence of that taking place on the ground. I am not pointing the finger at you. Putting on a school play for children with special needs can be done only in a two-year cycle because of the work that the teachers have to do and the help required in the school to work with those children to put the play on.

Ms Harkin: That is a good point.

Mr McMullan: It is a two-year cycle. There is no help out there.

Ms Harkin: That is interesting.

Mr McMullan: I come from the Glens, and children go to schools in Ballymena and Larne. That is the problem. The one thing that holds the attention of people with special needs — and it is a big one — is the arts, music and dance. We do that in our club at the weekend. What do we do? We have a CD sitting on a table in the middle of the room. That is what they are working to. We cannot get anything else. We cannot get anybody to come out to help. I am enthusiastic about what you are talking about. I hope that it can be widened out. I think that NILGA could be a good vehicle for you to get out to councils and get that message out to rural areas.

Ms Harkin: Get somebody from your group to contact me.

Mr McMullan: That is lovely. Thank you very much indeed.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation. It is good to see people with a passion for and belief in what they are trying to do.

Mr Simpson: Thank you very much for the opportunity. We appreciate it.