

# Cultural Brokerage and Creative Clusters

## Future Screens NI and levelling-up in a pandemic environment

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## Introduction

**This report offers an insight into the ways in which Future Screens NI, the Creative Economy creative industries cluster for Northern Ireland, has over the past year since the pandemic emerged, developed strategies which, while aimed at addressing the impact of Covid restrictions on the creative economy, have by default through these strategies made significant advances in the policy sphere, advances which in turn allowed these initially short-term initiatives to become embedded formally in the social and cultural infrastructure of the cluster.**

The focus of Future Screens NI (FSNI), like the other eight clusters across the UK, is primarily on growth in the creative industries through investment in R&D, yet mid-term assessment of the clusters undertaken by the AHRC would suggest that FSNI has had an impact on the social and cultural life of the region which may not be as pronounced in other regions. This paper examines a number of case studies pertinent to that theme and offers suggestions as to how these particular examples might have a resonance for both local and national policy makers across the UK and, in some cases, those internationally. It is essentially a qualitative paper, embedded in the methodologies of detailed analytical description often referred to as 'thick data'.<sup>1</sup>

## Regional context

**The most recent DCMS statistics for the creative industries indicate that they contribute £111.7 billion to the UK economy (2018) whilst growth in the sector is five times larger than the UK economy as a whole, growth which equates to almost £13 million an hour to the UK economy. Importantly the NESTA Creative Nation Report 2018<sup>2</sup> also highlights the need for cluster development, in a context where specialised micro-businesses need good connectivity, business support services, funding and networking opportunities.**

At the Northern Ireland level, the 2017 draft Programme for Government<sup>3</sup> proposes that the region have 'an innovative creative society where people can fulfil their potential (p.25)', while the draft Northern Ireland Industrial Strategy identified a further goal of making the region 'a place where innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship are embedded across our entire education system, supporting skills development to meet the needs of industry (p.34).' Moreover, the draft NI Industrial Strategy<sup>4</sup> and the Invest NI Business Strategy 2017<sup>5</sup> identify 'digital and creative technologies' as one of six 'broad' areas of the economy where Northern Ireland has 'world-class capabilities', further noting that 'NI has gained a global reputation in the creative industries with notable success in the TV and film industry as well as the burgeoning animation sector.' It is worth noting that FSNi operates as a single cluster for the whole of NI which sets it apart from other regional/sectoral clusters in the AHRC creative clusters programme and crucially involves aspects which are present in clusters operating in other identifiable national contexts, for example Clwstwr in Wales and InGame and Creative Informatics in Scotland. These aspects include a pronounced focus on the social and cultural dividend and a sustained interface with key political decision makers.

The 2018 Matrix Report into Creative Technologies in Northern Ireland<sup>6</sup> sets out how creative technology companies play two roles in Northern Ireland: firstly, as a key component of the Northern Ireland Knowledge Exchange environment, while, secondly, working very closely with other businesses such as fintech, cyber security, data analytics, life and health sciences and advanced engineering. The report also states that further growth requires support, so that enterprises 'have the contacts, the business skills and access to the facilities needed to succeed (p.20).'

In the regional context, the creative industries in NI generate £1.4 billion in GVA, 2.7 per cent of the total GVA, employing 2.9 per cent of the entire NI workforce (24,000 people directly as noted by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), but 42,000 if including the wider creative economy). The Creative Industries Sector Deal (2018)<sup>7</sup> highlights the need to 'provide a more consistent national spread of creative industries (p.22)' confirming the Belfast region as one of 47 UK creative clusters and noting its 'high concentration and growth (p24-5)'. The Sector Deal states 'The problem is not that London is too big, but that other centres are too small. There is enormous potential to grow other leading hubs across the UK (p22).' Most recently Belfast has been cited as being amongst the top five cities in the UK for both technology and creativity.

NI is unique in many ways within the UK: post-BREXIT, it is the only part of the UK with a land border with Europe, and has a 'special' status under the UK/EU Brexit agreement. In essence NI operates as a creative industries corridor into Europe. As a post-troubles society, NI is still in transition, shifting its workforce from a reliance on the public sector and its industrial heritage to become an important regional economy with a unique offering within the creative industries which draws on its rich culture and heritage. A strong Knowledge Economy (KE) grounded in ideas and intellectual capital, driven by emerging technologies, has enabled NI to punch above its weight including attracting FDI, and is bolstered by the quality of its two HEIs, along with a young and energetic workforce. It is an economy dominated by micro-businesses (95 per cent of all businesses in NI)<sup>8</sup> with 950 companies focused on export, but with 60 per cent of R&D spend concentrated in ten firms.<sup>9</sup>

The NI Creative Industries Cluster has the potential to be a sustainable creative ecosystem operating at local, national and international levels. As noted above, it is built upon well-developed resilient and tacit networks and supports, economic, cultural, and social, whilst also having the clear potential for new, exciting and economically sustainable international capabilities. For a region emerging from a period of conflict and social and cultural division, the creative industries sector offers an alternative and successful paradigm for economic attainment, cultural expression, and personal growth.

A target of 54,000 jobs in the NI knowledge economy by 2025 has been set. Growth in creative industries is faster than for NI industry as a whole (14.5 per cent vs 5.3 per cent in GVA 2008-13) and significantly more intense than the UK as a whole (9 per cent); growth is particularly significant in creative technologies (60 per cent). NI now has a strong level of superfast connectivity, bolstered by a recent announcement of both a £150 million investment in broadband, and Project Kelvin, a high speed transatlantic fibre project on the North Coast offering high speed business connectivity at a cost 20 per cent below the median for other cities in the UK and Ireland. Digital Catapult launched its new Immersive Lab in Belfast in November 2017.

## Future Screens NI



Future Screens NI (FSNI) is one of nine creative clusters funded through the AHRC/Industrial Challenge Strategy Fund (ICSF) Creative Industry Clusters Programme (CICP).

The process of becoming one of the clusters involved producing and articulating complex sets of historical and future-facing data which would illustrate the growth potential of the creative industries in the Northern Ireland region. On being awarded the funding these data sets then became the basis for the setting of performance targets relating to R&D growth, employment figures and GVA growth for the five year life-span of the cluster. For all those involved in the CICP these would be the key performance indicators.

From the outset, however, there was also a less formal criterion, which was referred to at the launch of the CICP by both Sir Peter Bazalgette and Sir Mark Walport in their opening addresses as 'the social and cultural dividend'. While there were no defined performance indicators for this criterion the AHRC felt it sufficiently important as to establish a cross-cluster Working Group to develop methodologies by which this 'dividend' might be measured, work which is ongoing.

This development was of significance for FSNI. While the economic aspects of the CICP are crucial to the region, it was always understood by the team delivering the programme in NI that any economic growth would be a means of addressing aspects of social and cultural dysfunction caused by the dual legacies of economic peripherality and thirty years of political conflict. This understanding had been formalised in the CICP application document in the form of a project to be developed with Alex McDowell and the World Building Institute which aimed to bring disaffected young people in 'flashpoint' areas into partnership with local creative industries to map future career possibilities. This work is ongoing, now named the Story Engine project.

It is, of course, the case for all clusters that social and cultural dividend will follow economic growth. It is not the case, however, that such growth will address the needs of those communities most at social and cultural risk in regions which are witnessing a period of sustained economic growth. FSNI has already identified a fundamental tension in relation to what growth means in the NI context, a tension between 'pure' economic growth and a growth strategy which encompasses developmental strategies aimed at increasing social and cultural dividend. Douglas Rushkoff highlighted in his 2016 publication *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus*<sup>10</sup> that a key reason for the failure of the digital economy to deliver its expected potential was that instead of building the distributed digital economy these new networks could foster, it doubled down on the industrial age mandate for growth above all. As Rushkoff shows, this is more the legacy of early corporatism and central currency than a feature of digital technology and he

argues that we are operating a 21st century digital economy on a 13th Century printing-press era system. This doubling down is reflected in the number of conversations with leading creative industries bodies in Belfast where the imperative for growth dominates any discussion about creating a region where the creative industries are embedded in such a way that the entire region benefits rather than a 'closed' creative strata circulating and sharing human and financial source for the benefit of that strata and the delivery of continual extractive growth.

The worst-case long-term outcome of such a strategy is the creation of a free-floating creative industries sector which is not embedded in the economic, social and cultural ecosystem and which is hence vulnerable, to changes in economic demand and shifts in political strategic priorities, through a misguided notion that such an economic position is inevitable in the present climate. This undermining notion that nothing can be done to change the direction and definition of economic growth is also addressed by Srecko Horvat in his latest publication *Poetry From the Future*.<sup>11</sup> Through the prism of contemporary screen productions such as the *Leftovers*, *Handmaid's Tale* and *The Circle*, Horvat develops a thesis that there is a discourse of inevitability dominant in public debate about economic growth which leaves no space for disagreement or the emergence of alternative structures. Horvat terms this discourse the 'resignation syndrome' and argues that 'today we are living in a long winter of melancholy, not only in Europe but across the world, a period in which the most important condition for shaping our future is evaporating – namely hope: hope that anything other than this nightmare is possible (p.16).' It is obvious that hope is vital for a region emerging from a period of extreme unrest and economic peripherality, and given the possibilities for new social and cultural working practices the creative industries can be central to this hope in the NI context. Horvat argues that incremental change, a sustained one-step-at-a-time methodology, offers one way of altering the dominant discourse and creating radical policies of transformation. The work with the World Building Institute is one step in the transformation of the creative economy in NI aimed at bringing together the creative businesses, local activists, key governmental agencies and marginalised/disenfranchised groups to find ways in which the creative industries can become a fundamental change agent in all communities and regions in NI.

When the full import of the COVID-19 crisis began to emerge in March 2020 FSNI rapidly had to rethink its planning priorities and explore the most effective strategies for sustaining the work of the cluster. Discussions with key partners indicated that, while much of the work with project partners could continue online, a major factor would be the cancellation of projects for which companies were providing content. What was immediately apparent, however, was the conviction that there was going to be an undefined period of social and cultural hardship. It was also evident that the pandemic was not going to be a passing aberration but was going to be a factor in planning, at whatever level, for a sustained period of time.

It was also the case, nevertheless, that the emergence of the pandemic offered the opportunity to drive the kinds of radical social intervention the clusters were meant to initiate but which are usually only possible through an incremental model of change. The Management Team at FSNI also realised this was an opportunity to introduce a formal set of funding initiatives focused entirely on social and cultural dividends, initiatives which would ultimately also leverage economic benefit. Crucially these initiatives would be grounded in the fundamental premise that this was a moment to develop original and radical creative industry methodologies, technical, social and cultural, a moment to rewrite the narrative. Renata Avila and Srecko Horvat encompass this shift in their use of the term 'Everything Must Change' a response to the opinion expressed by Alain Delon in the movie *The Leopard* that 'everything must change, so that everything remains the same'.<sup>12</sup> Following Avila and Horvat, FSNI is also convinced that everything must change so that nothing remains the same.

While FSNI can claim agency in the introduction of a new set of funding parameters for the cluster the outcomes of this initiative have been much more profound than could have been expected. The decision to actively pursue a social and cultural funding agenda has accelerated the visibility of FSNI and embedded it at the core of key regional decision-making bodies. It has elevated its leadership role for the creative industries while advancing its formal relationships with other policy makers, for example in the education and community sectors. It has facilitated a move away from an essentially urban operating base into a more nuanced relationship with rural areas and it has encouraged a detailed analysis of the kinds of collaborative practice necessary to sustain engagement with key players in the region. Finally, it has facilitated a closer relationship between the creative industries and what might be termed the 'arts' sector at time when there was still an unspoken tension between these sectors, a tension which FSNI has always believed to be both manufactured and unnecessary, but one which, from discussions with CICP colleagues, is clearly present across all the clusters.

## Rationale

**Given its particularities, why might the experience of Future Screens NI in Northern Ireland be a useful case study to those working in other UK locations?**

There are a number of reasons why the NI pandemic situation may have are general applications:

- All the circumstances where FSNI found its influence expanding were grounded in an initial 'grass roots' community project. This bottom-up trajectory indicates that the impetus for change can emerge from the communities where that change will be most beneficial and the success of such projects not only impacts on policy makers but encourages them to engage in order to be associated with real social, cultural and economic growth.
- There is clear evidence that there has been a shift in the public imagination in relation to the importance of creative practice and the creative economy. A number of reports from the PEC based on survey work undertaken during the pandemic underline the convictions that the demand for creative industry products has grown but more importantly that there is likely to be a lasting legacy from this shift.<sup>13</sup> The FSNI case studies offer further evidence of this
- Much has been written about the need for a social and cultural reset, often encapsulated under the unhelpful banner of the 'new normal'. The FSNI work offers some examples of what this re-set might look like in strategy and policy terms for the creative industries.
- While Northern Ireland is a relatively small region with unique social and cultural features, there is nothing to suggest that the initiatives pursued during the pandemic period would not scale for larger regions and cities since as noted above the origins are grounded in community and constituency work.
- An examination of the FSNI activity over the last year illustrates that the pandemic has created new channels for, and patterns of, influence which a creative cluster is well placed to exploit.
- The prominence of the cluster within the region has created an emphasis upon recovery which is centred upon the live and the digital combining to generate innovative space to support re-opening and cultural and creative recovery with economic return.

## Northern Ireland and urban/rural liminality

**One key aspect of the Northern Ireland context is the nuanced relationship between the urban and the rural. While Northern Ireland has a number of designated cities (Belfast, Derry, Armagh, Lisburn, Newry) other than Belfast these tend to be small conurbations earning the title of city due to the fact that they house a cathedral.**

One consequence of this, and the overall small size of the region, is that the distinction between rural and urban becomes blurred with many living in what would be deemed rurality but working in one of the larger urban areas. Accepted definitions of Travel to Work areas (TWA) mean that essentially NI is one single TWA region. Moreover, as with Scotland and Glasgow, many of the smaller towns surrounding Belfast have, through suburban growth, become part of the city in the public imagination and are seen as part of the greater Belfast area although formally designated as distinct council entities. The effect of this is that much of Northern Ireland exists in a state of liminality, being literally on the threshold of the urban experience but also metaphorically being on the threshold of embracing or benefitting from emerging economic, social and cultural possibilities, and FSNi has been continually aware of the need for funding models which are inclusive of this rural liminality. For policy makers, this liminality creates a situation where new initiatives (whether funding or regulatory) have to be communicated at a regional rather than a sectoral level with a sustained understanding of equality of access, for example by ensuring all policy papers are available in English, Irish and Ulster Scots.

This urban/rural tension is not a new problem. In 1973 Raymond Williams in his classic study, *The City and The Country*, outlined the ways in which the rural has come to be seen as a repository for parochiality and limitation while the city has been seen as the centre for technological advance and cultural futurism. These stereotypical notions have been challenged by the increased possibilities of travel and online access and a more nuanced discourse has emerged where the difference between urban and rural creativity (and industry) is one of individualism (rural) versus collectivism (urban). This distinction is also problematised further by the liminality outlined above, a state which many regions in the UK may share. While the liminal in classic definitions is discussed mainly in pejorative terms, Homi Bhabha<sup>14</sup> argues that liminality has a distinct strategic potential in so far as it has the capacity to subvert accepted norms concerning place, space and identity. This notion is given a more contemporary resonance in a recent work by Richard Sennett and Pablo Sendra.<sup>15</sup> While focused on the city, this work introduces the theory that the idea of the planned and ordered city, a theory developed by Sennett in the 1970s and espoused by creative industry commentators such as Richard Florida, is now deeply flawed. Sennett and Sendra argue that it is now the case that real change and collaborative growth in cities is encouraged through the creation of 'infrastructures of disorder', liminal spaces where architecture, urban planning, community activism and politics/policy interact to drive change. It is this notion of 'infrastructures of disorder' which could have important resonances for the advance of the creative industries in rural areas.

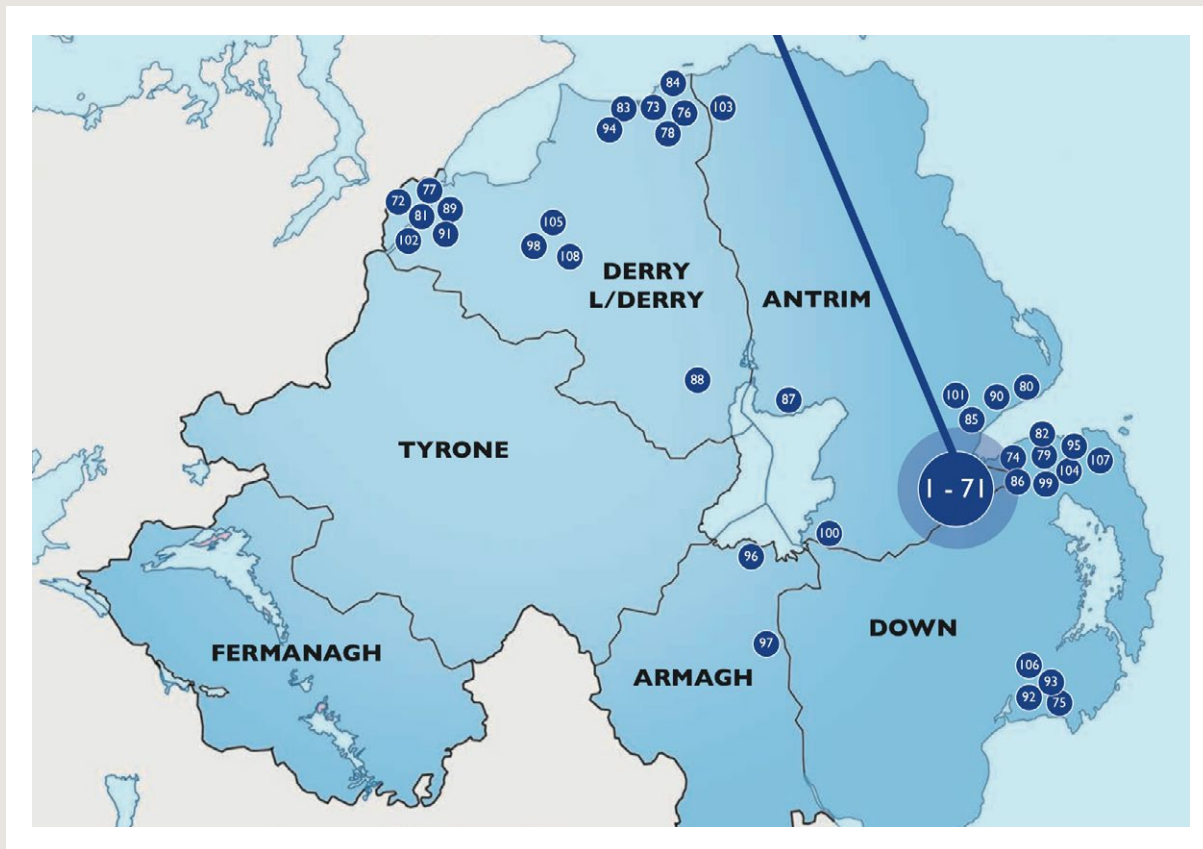


This individual/collective distinction is, however, partially borne out in the work which FSNI has been supporting over the pandemic period. A number of projects funded through the FSNI Rewriting the Narrative call (£5K awards) which was launched in March 2020 allowed individuals to develop ideas which were being delivered on a voluntary basis and move them to a formal business structure suggesting that a relatively small injection of finance can accelerate a shift from community voluntarism to community economy. This suggestion is underlined by the work of Siepel et al on micro-clusters.<sup>16</sup> Two aspects of this research are of particular relevance in the NI context. Firstly, Siepel et al argue that one of the key problems for creative industries outside a larger creative industry cluster is access to finance and this is further exacerbated by rurality. In many circumstances this access is not merely a question of not knowing how to present a sophisticated pitch to possible founders but a more fundamental issue of not only not knowing what funding may be available, but of not being supported in a context where the possibility of growth can emerge, and the access to funding becomes a possibility. Few of the small rural creative businesses in Northern Ireland are connected to the networks of information which would facilitate making funding applications. The two funding support calls launched by FSNI during 2020 (Rewriting the Narrative and Narrative Futures) allowed consideration of projects which might have been seen as out of scope in a pre-pandemic economy and this shift in focus created contact with small businesses which might not otherwise have considered themselves eligible. This in turn led to them becoming part of the FSNI partnership network (through events such as the weekly FSNI Future Tuesday presentations) which then increased both their visibility and their significance. This process was cited as one of the reasons why the Department for Communities NI (the governmental body responsible for the creative industries) sought to develop a more formal relationship with FSNI and to investigate the ways in which this voluntary work to economic business model might be exploited. In policy terms, this suggests that relatively small injections of funding to nascent creators in peripheral areas can encourage rapid growth and political interest particularly if these creators become part of a larger network structure. One striking example of this is the Little Forget-Me-Nots business which has emerged in the Armagh region of NI ([www.littleforgetmenots.com](http://www.littleforgetmenots.com)).

The case of Little Forget-Me-Nots raises a further interesting point to be taken from this shift to 'out of scope' projects concerning the methodologies whereby clusters might generate greater engagement across the creative sector. The work of the Rewriting the Narrative call highlighted for FSNI the importance of what might be termed the Wycliffe factor. John Wycliffe was a 14th century radical priest who questioned the authority of the established church and was the first person to have the Bible translated into English. However, because the technology was not available to produce the translation on a popular scale his work went unnoticed, and it fell to Martin Luther, a century later, to become the seminal figure in the Reformation because this work coincided with the invention of the printing press and was hence widely available. This underlines the notion that while clusters focus on the experimental and cutting-edge – the moonshots – this work needs to be bookended by community engagement with the technologies available to most of the people most of the time if the creative industries are to be fully embedded in the public imagination and the public economy.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, the work of Siepel et al<sup>18</sup> highlighted the existence of micro-clusters, particularly in rural settings, and the key role they play in knowledge acquisition, ambition for growth and access to funding. In the NI context much of the creative industries work operates in a liminality poised between micro-cluster and larger, more developed cluster models. The geographic spread of FSNi funded projects shown in Figure 1 illustrates this.

Figure 1

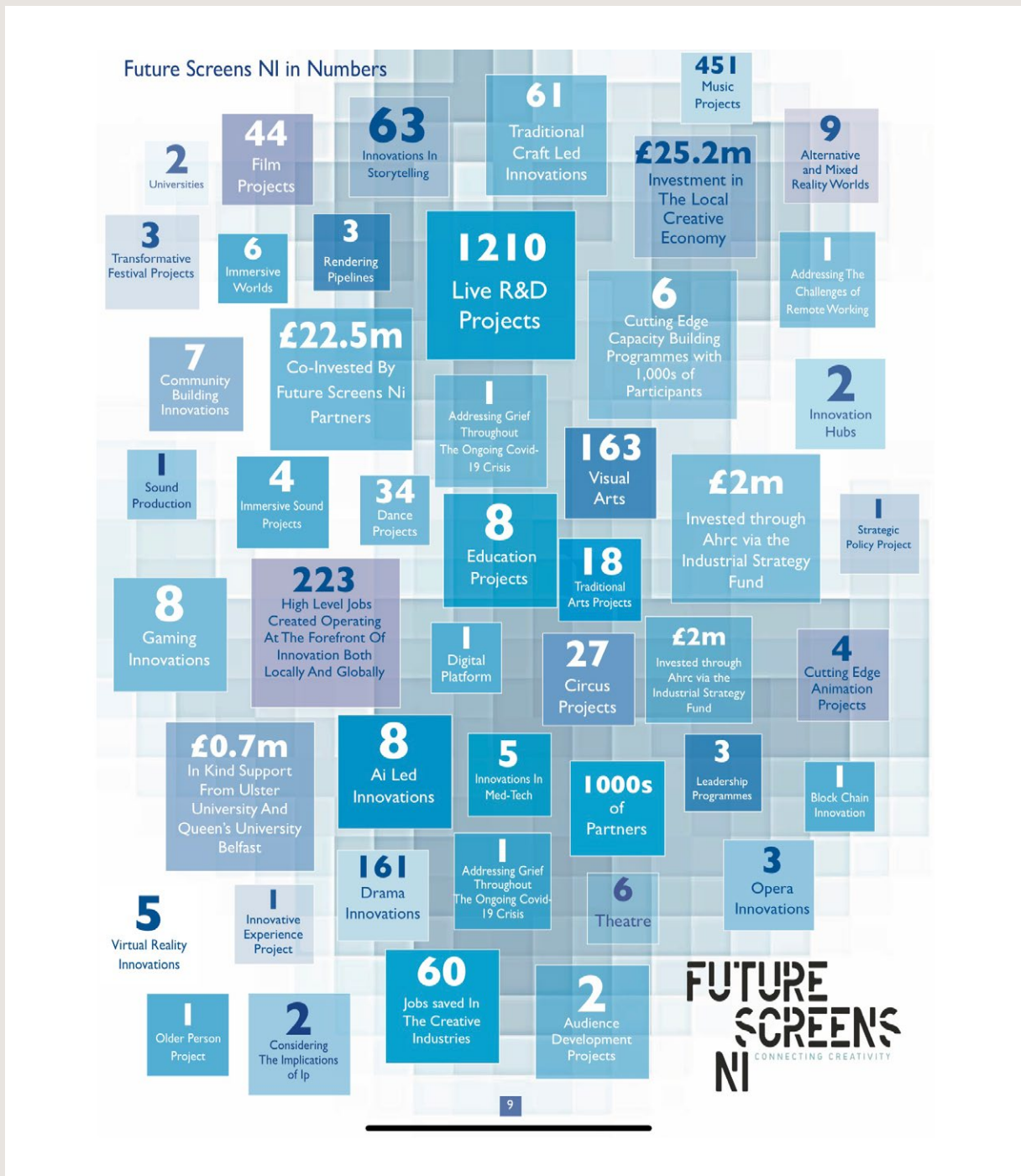


Two points are worthy of consideration in relation to this mapping. Firstly, the absence of any projects in the Tyrone and Fermanagh counties underlines the arguments about access and visibility. More importantly, however, it may also introduce a further dimension in that these areas have a double disenfranchisement being both rural/liminal and geographically peripheral, peripherality in this context referring to areas which are weak economically relative to their trading partners (internal and external) and which are so embedded that the expected economic convergence with neighbouring economic communities fails to materialise.

Secondly, a more detailed analysis of a number of these projects suggests that there may be 'invisible' micro-clusters within an identified the micro-cluster. Hence, for example, Little Forget-Me-Nots, located in the Armagh region, is being delivered through support from a network of other crafters and established commercial companies which might not consider themselves part of the creative economy sector. There are three main impacts which would appear to result from the injection of a relatively small sum of money (£5K plus in kind academic resource support): the awardee finds a new confidence in the

product or service being offered; this leads in turn to an expansion of the product/project; the awardee is brought into a wider network of creative industry producers and gains new knowledge concerning funding opportunities and skills acquisition. This is illustrated by the fact that from the group funded under the Rewriting the Narrative funding strand 13 applications have since been made to FSNI for the Proof of Concept award (£20K). A more general impact of this process is that the social and cultural dividend of these industries to their communities becomes visible and can be tracked in a more effective manner as the mapping in figure two illustrates.

Figure 2



## From project to policy

**When FSNI launched the funding calls aimed at addressing the crisis in the region amongst creative companies (in essence resilience funding) there was no expectation that the impact would be so profound. The direct funding of community projects, and the resulting impact as outlined above, made these projects visible to the government at a time when it was also looking for partnerships which might address the crisis need.**

This brought FSNI into direct communication with the Department for Communities, this in turn leading to FSNI gaining representation on key advisory groups working with the department. At this point FSNI understood a need to strategise this development with a view to embedding a greater understanding of the role the creative industries can play in both economic recovery and social and cultural well-being. The strategy which emerged (and is in continual adjustment) has four key aspects:

1. Bringing FSNI into more direct partnership with key policy-making bodies. The best example is the relationship FSNI now has with Arts Council NI, a relationship which has resulted in the co-creation of three collaborative funding calls to the value of £10.9 million but, more importantly, also challenged the idea that there is a tension between the creative industries ethos and those who feel they work in an 'artist' space. Future Screens NI has played a significant role in ensuring that creative innovation and the deployment of new, emerging and immersive technologies have become embedded in programmes which may previously have had a more traditional and less experimental profile. There is now also a commitment to work collaboratively to develop skills acquisition programmes through the FSNI Future Foundation launched in December 2020.
2. Developing direct relationships with key political figures. To date meetings have taken place with all the major parties represented at the Assembly and the thrust of these meetings is the presentation of evidence which underlines the need for the creative industries sector to be represented formally on policy and decision-making bodies in the Assembly. The recent welcome given by the Economy Minister for the creation of the virtual production Screen and Media Innovation Lab (SMIL) under the Belfast region city Deal initiative has advanced this case. Direct engagement with politicians and the Department for the Economy in particular has resulted in the recognition of the importance of the creative industries as a prominent economic cluster in the recently published economic strategy *10X Economy – an economic vision for a decade of innovation* (DfE, 2020).<sup>19</sup>
3. The emergence for FSNI of a more nuanced understanding of the collaborative strategies essential to operating in a region where notions of social and cultural identity are deeply contested. These nuances include: facilitatory collaboration – this applies to organisations or individuals with a well developed and clearly articulated plan for the delivery of a project with potential for growth impact. In this case the funding allows the project to come to fruition; developmental collaboration – in this case the collaboration allows individuals or organisations to take an idea to the

point where it has a clearly defined structure and a plan for delivery. This type of collaboration is demanding of the host body's resource (in this case FSNI) since it involves frequent and numerous meetings to offer advice and encouragement so the awardee can gain the confidence to make the project public; strategic collaboration – this is where FSNI identifies a key partner and actively seeks a collaborative arrangement with that body. The Arts Council NI and the Department for Communities are examples. In all of these cases the strategy is dynamic and grounded in an acceptance of the need for pragmatic engagement.

4. The rethinking of FSNI funding structures to allow rapid and direct intervention in community initiatives, which will advance the creative industries in under-represented areas and underpin the developing relationship with political representatives.

The development of this strategy has been advanced by the greater visibility of FSNI which has encouraged policy-setting bodies to seek meetings on possible future collaboration. The Education Authority NI is one example of a body which is in discussions as to how the creative industries and creative industry skills and methodologies might be applied to systemic educational problems in the region. At the moment FSNI is working to develop a project addressing the needs of parents supporting children with identified specific educational needs, and there is also interest in creating programmes aimed at advancing digital and technological understanding amongst both young people and their teachers. This could be facilitated through the FSNI recently established Future Foundation, the talent capacity building forum for the cluster.

Two other strategies developed by FSNI during the last year relate to issues of place and heritage, as noted above, a deeply contested space in this region. Many community groups are working to repurpose areas of waste land in Belfast city centre and FSNI has been able to support this work if it is related to potential growth for the creative industries sector. One example is an ongoing partnership with the Market Development Association (one of the most deprived areas in inner Belfast) where funding has been made available (matched by Belfast City Council) to undertake a feasibility study on the potential for a Creative Knowledge Hub in the area. Similarly FSNI has targeted the creation of partnerships with site specific heritage projects, generally related to buildings with a cultural significance attached to revered local figures, for example CS Lewis or James Connolly. An added bonus to these partnerships is that they often bring further intervention from leading political figures in whose constituencies these site specific projects exist, hence underlining further the wider economic implications of a strong creative industry sector.

## Future deferred (not)

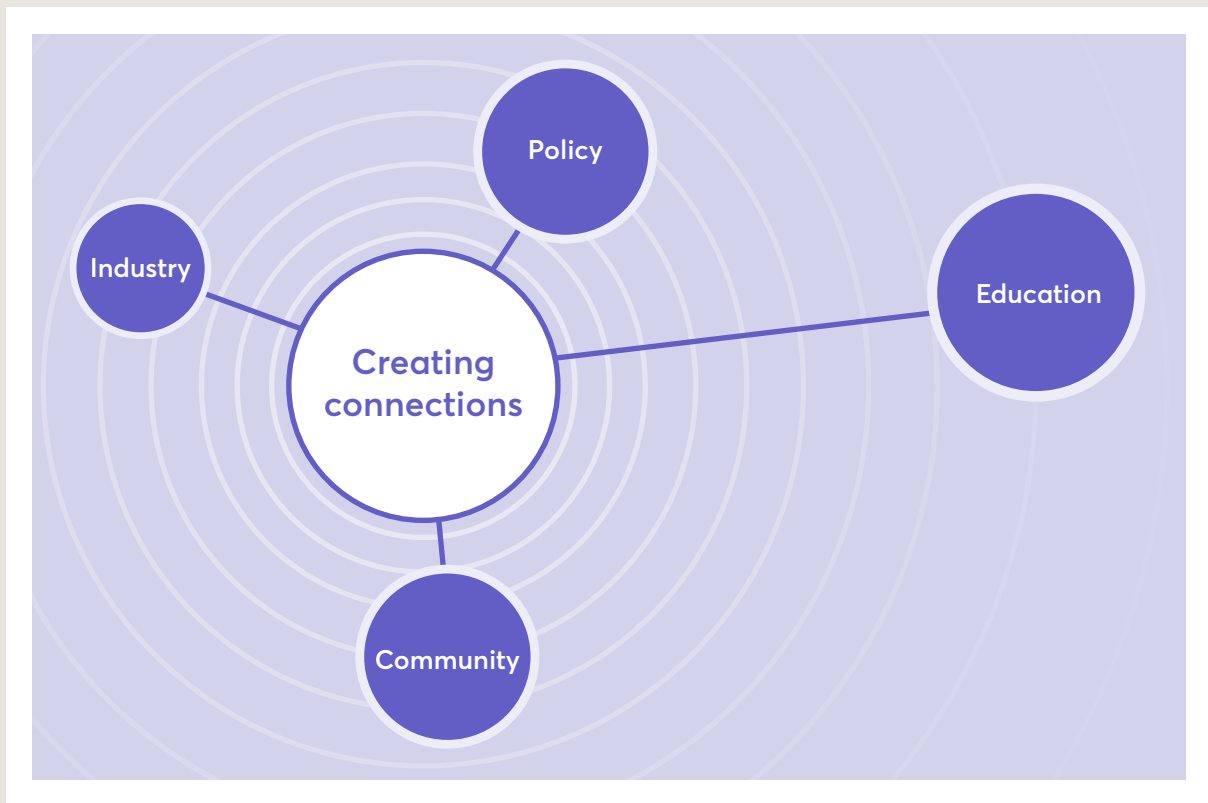
**The central question now is how this investment (£378K across 32 projects), which has offered such opportunity for the sectoral and political positioning of the cluster in the region, can be utilised as a means of theorising the longer term strategic work of FSNI.**

It has long been a mantra of FSNI that the creative industries can become the new heavy industries in the region and, mid-way through the cluster programme, a moment may have surfaced where FSNI can embed itself as one of the key bodies managing and driving the 'infrastructures of disorder' referred to earlier as a means of embedding the creative industries in the public imagination. One possible starting point for thinking about the creation of such a strategy is a document, *The Imaginary Crisis*<sup>20</sup> published in April 2020 by Demos, Helsinki and written by Geoff Mulligan. In this work Mulgan argues that the world is beset by a failure in public imagination to the point where the capacity to imagine apocalypse (or pandemic) has eclipsed the capacity to imagine a better and more creative society a generation or more into the future. Mulgan then goes on to offer a number of models whereby imagination might be re-inserted into the public space in education, the economy and social and cultural policy making. Whilst it would be too easy to suggest that the creative industries and associated infrastructures are the means of delivering this new imaginary space, this work does pose an interesting provocation as to how the importance of the creative imagination can become an accepted aspect of all policy planning.

For FSNI the starting point in this process is to rethink its framework of influence. The cluster is fortunate in having met a number of its key performance indicators (KPIs) thanks to the willingness of industry partners and businesses to work with and support the cluster and this allows for a more confident rethink of the framework. Figure 3 shows the structure of that new framework as it is being developed:

In this model, Future Screens NI would be positioned as making the connections, building on the cultural brokerage role which has emerged during the last year. Since FSNI has no commercial agenda it has come to be seen as a neutral broker and this has facilitated greater possibility of sustained communication with government and engenders trust with industry and community.

Figure 3



More interestingly what the emerging model offers is an opportunity to revisit the concept of 'imagined community' as developed by Benedict Anderson.<sup>21</sup> Anderson argued that identity (especially national identity) is socially and culturally constructed with aspects such as the media, key national events such as sporting events and the convergence of capitalism and print technology allowing citizens who might never meet to believe they belonged to the same community of imagination.

Following from Mulgan's *Imaginary Crisis* the moment may be right to pursue the creation of a new 'Imaginary Community' one which is founded on the convergence of new and emerging technologies, industry-based creative practice, community connection through online platforms, the advance of creativity and digital skills in training and education and the delivery of regional policies aimed at supporting innovation and entrepreneurship at whatever scale of production, an intervention targeted at the intersection of 'the infrastructures of disorder'.

## Conclusions

**In general it can be argued that the FSNI experience during the crisis offers a series of possibilities for policy interventions:**

- Involvement of a cluster in community projects which allow voluntary work to become formalised and economically significant raises the profile/visibility of the creative industries sector allowing for interaction with key policy decision makers.
- Creative industry projects which align the sectoral realities with governments' priorities (for example in health, education, community support or economy) can bring the creative industry sector into direct discussion with key policy makers.
- Creative industry projects which resonate at the local level with contested sites (ethnic, cultural, heritage) instigate political interest at the constituency level, an interest which is fuelled the more successful the project becomes and which facilitates the emergence of a strategy focused on the intersection of place, innovation and technology.
- A creative industries cluster working across a range of geographical and social spaces has the opportunity to develop a strategic brokerage role which is agenda free in political terms and hence the cluster becomes an 'honest broker' with politicians in key discussions. The adoption of an actively pursued pragmatic collaborative strategy advances further this brokerage role.
- Relatively small injections of funding from a creative industries cluster can develop a network of partners which encourages contact with policy makers while at the same time advancing the strength and visibility of that new network. The key is underlining that this is investment in future economic growth, not resilience funding during a crisis. Future Screens NI investment has supported agencies to transition from subsidy based to revenue generating. This is a particularly important impact in the context of the reliance of the region upon public investment. The model therefore points towards a mechanism of future sustainability and stability.
- Given the present concerns about the levels of digital expertise in the UK initiatives which support the advance of digital skills or which offer capacity building opportunities initiate interests from both local and national policy makers.

The outcome of these interventions could be the emergence of a circular model of influence in which creative cluster investment leads to new economic growth in peripheral areas, this encourages the emergence of new networks, these prompt engagement from key political policy makers the outcome of which is the possibility for further investment and the initiation of the next cycle of the model.

The recent citing of Belfast as being amongst the top five cities in the UK for technology and creativity suggests that the region is ideally placed to contribute to policy development in the region over the coming period. FSNI will be working in partnership with others to advance such a collaborative model for policy development during the remainder of the life of the cluster. In so doing, it is hoped the work can build on a year which saw *Forbes* magazine for December 2020, in an article entitled 'Small But Mighty: The Rise of Northern Ireland as a Creative Hub', assert that 'Future Screens NI play(s) a crucial role in supporting and nurturing the creative industries'.<sup>22</sup>



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## About the author

Professor Paul Moore joined the University of Ulster in 1999 and has since been active in the development of the creative arts/industries policy in the university. He was head of the School of Creative Arts and Technologies from 2008 to 2017 before serving a short period as head of the School of Communication and Media. He is now Director of Future Screens NI, the AHRC funded creative industries cluster for NI, and is a Co-Director of Ulster's Creative Industries Institute (CII). He was awarded a personal chair in 2009 becoming Professor of Creative Technologies at the Magee campus, and was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2014. He became a Fellow of the RSA in 2021.

His research is focused on both the creative industries and the ways in which theory and practice can be brought together in research, training and education.

Most recently he has been involved in various arts data research projects with national bodies such as NESTA in the UK. He has published widely in a range of journals/books and his practice has been exhibited in a number of commissioned gallery exhibitions in London, Coventry, Belfast, Derry, Lough Neagh, and the National Gallery of Namibia.

He was the Ofcom Content Board member for Northern Ireland from 2007 to 2013. From 1995 to 2004 he was also a board member of the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission and chaired the education committee which developed the seminal Wider Literacy policy document. In his spare time he is a freelance broadcaster with BBC Radio Ulster and has written and presented a range of documentaries for BBC national radio.

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