Creative Industries Journal
Volume 3 Number 1
 English language. doi: 10.1386/cij.3.1.79_1

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Creative industries in a rural region: *Creative West*: The creative sector in the Western Region of Ireland

ABSTRACT

Much of the policy debate surrounding the creative sector focuses on urban areas; however, particular 'place' strengths that exist in rural areas can attract creative workers. Developing the creative sector in rural areas has the potential to generate sustainable high-quality enterprise and employment opportunities and contribute to rural diversification. This article examines the potential and challenges for the creative sector in rural regions through the case of the rural Western Region of Ireland and the activities of the Western Development Commission. The creative sector in the region accounts for approximately 3 per cent of employment and 1.3 per cent of Gross Value Added, is dominated by micro-enterprises and self-employed individuals and has low export activity. Quality of life, the natural environment and the region's creative legacy are critical factors in attracting creative people to this rural region. Challenges for businesses in the sector include the need to attract and retain current and future creative talent, as well as threats to the region's key 'creative place' strengths. Issues around the provision and quality of infrastructure, including broadband access and transport links, also exist. Development of policy and networking opportunities is important in supporting the sector's growth in rural regions.

KEYWORDS

creative industries
rural regions
Western Region of Ireland
quality of life
policy
networking

1. The quantitative and qualitative research on the creative sector in the Western Region was undertaken by Katrina Houghton, Graeme Harrison and Karen Barklie from the Belfast office of Oxford Economics under a consultancy

contract with the Western Development Commission.

2. Further information on the organization is available at www.wdc.ie.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Over the past decade and a half the creative sector has emerged as a coherent concept in policy discourse (United Nations (UN) 2008; National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) 2006). The sector has experienced higher growth rates than other sectors in recent years; generates high-quality employment (46.8 per cent of those working in the creative and cultural sector in the European Union (EU) in 2004 had at least a university degree); stimulates innovation in other sectors; and plays an important role in social inclusion and community building (UN 2008; KEA European Affairs 2006; NESTA 2008; Western Development Commission (WDC) 2009a).

Much of the debate on the sector, however, has focused on the urban context, with the 'creative city' in particular catching policy-makers' attention (Florida 2002). However, considerable creative business activity takes place in areas beyond large urban centres; in the EU-27, 24 per cent of cultural employment is in sparsely populated areas (Eurostat 2007). The sector has the potential to create sustainable high-quality enterprise and employment opportunities in the rural economy, as location factors such as quality of life and landscape can play a more important role than for other sectors (WDC 2009a; McGranahan and Wojan 2007; Experian and BOP Consulting 2006). The attraction of creative individuals and enterprises to rural areas enhances their attractiveness to other knowledge workers, entrepreneurs and inward investment. The potential role of the creative sector in stimulating rural development is not always fully recognized, or addressed, by policy approaches to the sector.

This article examines the role and potential of the creative sector in more rural regions through the case of the Western Region of Ireland and the activities of the Western Development Commission (WDC).[2] The WDC is a statutory organization promoting the economic and social development of the Western Region of Ireland (the counties of Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Western Region of Ireland (source: Western Development Commission).

The Western Region of Ireland is a rural region; 67.8 per cent of the population lives in rural areas (outside population centres of 1500 persons) (Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2007). It has a relatively weak urban structure and an employment profile highly dependent on local services, lower-value manufacturing, construction and the public sector. It lags the national average in output terms and has higher unemployment rates. However, the region experienced strong inward migration and improving educational attainment levels in recent years, enhancing its human resource capacity (WDC 2009b).

In 2007 the WDC began to investigate the Western Region's creative sector. At the time there was little quantitative data on the sector within the Republic of Ireland, and no national policy for the creative sector as a whole.[3] The WDC therefore commissioned baseline research, *Baseline Research on the Creative Industries Sector in the Western Region of Ireland* (Oxford Economics 2008), and produced a summary of the key findings setting out recommendations for developing the sector, *Creative West: The Creative Sector in the Western Region* (WDC 2009a). The WDC's intention was to raise awareness of the concept of the creative sector, which was little used in Ireland, to highlight the extent of the contribution of the sector to the region's economy, to identify the critical issues confronting creative businesses operating in the region, and to set out a series of recommended actions to support its further growth.

In this article, international experience on the creative sector in rural areas is examined, followed by a profile of the creative sector in the rural Western Region of Ireland. The key developmental issues facing the region's creative sector businesses are then set out, followed by a discussion of a number of the recommendations made by the WDC. Conclusions of relevance to rural regions in general are then drawn out.

3. Northern Ireland has a Strategic Action Plan for the creative industries (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Arts Council of Northern Ireland 2008).

BENEFITS OF CREATIVE INDUSTRIES FOR RURAL REGIONS

Creative industries are often considered to have an urban affinity; indeed, Florida's 'creative class' theory emerged from an analysis of the attributes of large urban areas that attract creative individuals (Florida 2002). However, as interest in the creative sector has grown among policy-makers, its potential for reinvigorating rural areas has received increased attention. Economic strategies for rural areas now often incorporate the creative sector as a priority development sector, e.g. Prince Edward County in Ontario (Corporation of the County of Prince Edward 2010), East Midlands in the United Kingdom (Burns and Kirkpatrick 2008).

The *Creative Countryside* report examined the role of the creative and cultural sector in rural districts in Britain. It found that the 50 fastest-growing rural districts in Britain had a higher share of creative and cultural employment (5.5 per cent) compared with the 50 slowest-growing rural districts (4.6 per cent) (Experian and BOP Consulting 2006). It also found that there was a positive relationship between the creative and cultural sector's share of employment in a rural district and that district's economic growth. Similarly in the United States it was found that the share of employment in creative occupations is positively associated with employment growth in rural (non-metropolitan) counties (McGranahan and Wojan 2007). These findings raise the question of causality: are these rural areas growing because they have a high share of creative and cultural employment, or are individuals and businesses in the creative sector most attracted to rural areas that are already experiencing strong growth?

4. The creative business survey was conducted by Perceptive Insight Market Research (PIMR) via telephone in April 2008. Full details of the methodology used for this research are contained in Chapter 4 and Annex F of Oxford Economics 2008.

In the context of this article, the most critical questions are what attracts creative talent to rural areas and how the creative sector can be supported and developed to become a more significant component of the rural economy. In the United States it was found that quality of life, access to outdoor amenities and activities, the quality of local schools, and social and cultural interaction in rural counties were important factors in determining their share of employment in creative occupations (McGranahan and Wojan 2007). Findings from the United Kingdom also point strongly to the importance of accessibility and transport links, with most of the rural districts with large shares of creative employment located in southern England, while most of the rural districts with low shares of creative employment were located in more peripheral, northern parts of Britain (Experian and BOP Consulting 2006).

Given declines in rural employment in agriculture, traditional manufacturing and construction, the creation of alternative employment options in rural areas is fundamental to their continuing viability. The creative sector can have a role in this, as well as stimulating innovation activity across the rest of the rural economy (Naylor 2007).

PROFILE OF THE WESTERN REGION OF IRELAND'S CREATIVE SECTOR

The definition of the creative sector used in the research in the Western Region was 'Occupations and industries centred on creativity, for the production and distribution of original goods and services' (WDC 2009a: 27). In practice, three broad creative categories, composed of twelve creative industries (Table 1), were examined in the conduct of the baseline research.

In order to measure the economic contribution of the Western Region's creative sector, a survey of 282 creative businesses was conducted and the results extrapolated.[4] This approach excludes those who work in a creative

Creative category	Creative industries
Creative application: industries that develop products or services primarily based on meeting a market demand.	• Art/Antiques trade • Architecture • Fashion • Publishing • Advertising • Crafts
Creative expression: industries where products or services are developed for audiences with an expressive story in mind.	• Music, visual and performing arts • Video, film and photography • Radio and TV broadcasting
Creative technology: industries that rely most on technology and digital media, particularly for their core functions.	• Internet and software • Digital media • Design

Source: adapted from WDC 2009a.

Table 1: Creative categories and constituent industries.

occupation but are not employed in a creative industry business, co-called 'embedded creatives' (Higgs and Cunningham 2008).

In total it was estimated that there were 4779 creative businesses in the Western Region, which directly employed 11,008 people (approximately 3 per cent of total employment). It was estimated that the sector generated annual turnover of €534 million and contributed €270 million to the Gross Value Added (GVA) of the region (approximately 1.3 per cent of regional GVA). A study of rural districts in the East Midlands of the United Kingdom found that the creative sector accounted for a similar share of total employment, 3 per cent, though there were some differences in methodology and definition (Burns and Kirkpatrick 2008).

The creative sector in the Western Region was largely composed of self-employed individuals or micro-enterprises (fewer than ten employees). Only 12 per cent of the businesses had more than ten employees, 49 per cent had between two and ten employees and the remaining 39 per cent were self-employed. Export activity was quite low, with an estimated total value of €72 million and with only a third of creative businesses receiving more than 5 per cent of their total turnover from exports. The creative sector's current relatively small size, scale and export activity indicates that potential exists to increase its economic contribution to the region, particularly given the sector's recent international growth trends (UN 2008).

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF THE WESTERN REGION'S CREATIVE SECTOR

Considering the spatial dimension, Table 2 shows the estimated number of people employed in the creative sector in each county, as well as the share of the county's total employment accounted for by the sector. Each county's population and share living in rural areas is also set out.

County	**No. employed in creative sector (2008)**	**Creative sector as share of total employment (2008)**	**Population (2006)**	**Per cent living outside centres of 1500+ (2006)**
	(No.)	**(%)**	**(No.)**	**(%)**
Galway	3878	3.4	231,670	56.9
Donegal	1929	3.1	147,264	75.2
Mayo	1536	2.7	123,839	71.2
Clare	1303	2.3	110,950	64.5
Sligo	1265	4.2	60,894	68.1
Leitrim	619	4.4	28,950	89.1
Roscommon	478	1.7	58,758	81.1
Western Region	**11,008**	**3.0**	**762,335**	**67.8**

Source: adapted from WDC 2008, 2009a and CSO 2007.

Table 2: Estimated number and share employed in creative sector, population and rural share of population in Western Region counties.

5. Twenty-five with business people in the sector, five with representatives of trade associations and a further ten with individuals from key public sector organizations. These interviews were undertaken by Katrina Houghton and Karen Barklie of Oxford Economics during April–June 2008.

In absolute terms, Galway, the region's largest and least rural county, had the highest number employed in the creative sector (3878). Galway city (population 72,414) has an acknowledged creative dynamic and international reputation in the arts world that is considered to have played an important role in its ability to attract the 'creative class' and to become a leading economic growth centre, notably in information and communication technologies (ICT) and medical devices (Collins 2009). The rural Connemara area in west County Galway meanwhile is home to a cluster of audio-visual companies that emerged as a result of the establishment in the area of TG4, the Irish-language television station, in 1996 (Collins 2009). While Galway had the largest number employed in the creative sector, in relative terms (3.4 per cent of total employment) it was less important there than in some other counties.

County Leitrim, the region's smallest and most rural county, had the highest proportion of its total employment in the sector (4.4 per cent). Leitrim is home to a cluster of crafts and arts businesses that expanded strongly during the early to mid-1990s, partly driven by the availability of low-cost property combined with a high quality of life and largely unspoilt rural landscape. Creative employment in the county is largely within the creative expression category, with low levels in creative technology.

In contrast, County Roscommon had the lowest share of creative employment (1.7 per cent). It has the second smallest population, is the second most rural county and neighbours Leitrim. Likely factors explaining the divergent experiences of these two neighbouring counties include the established cluster in Leitrim, greater opportunities for social and cultural interaction and the natural landscape. These factors were supported and reinforced by targeted efforts by local development groups and the local authority in Leitrim to invest in and promote the creative sector and creative infrastructure, often with strong involvement from the sector itself. Examples include the Leitrim Design House (http://intoleitrim.com), Leitrim Sculpture Centre (www.leitrimsculpturecentre.ie) and the Dock Arts Centre (www.thedock.ie).

ISSUES FOR CREATIVE BUSINESSES IN IRELAND'S WESTERN REGION

Forty interviews with creative businesses in the region,[5] a stakeholder workshop and input from an expert advisory group, together with the survey results, were used to identify the key development issues facing creative businesses in the region. A framework that categorizes issues as relating to creative place, creative people or creative support, also used by Burns and Kirkpatrick in the rural East Midlands (Burns and Kirkpatrick 2008), was selected to examine the issues.

Creative place issues: The quality of life and natural landscape in the Western Region were cited as important factors influencing location. Elements such as the landscape, remoteness, natural surroundings, waterways, lighting, space and heritage were named as important for allowing creativity to thrive, particularly for those in the creative expression and application categories. Of those interviewed who had relocated to the region, all had moved for the quieter lifestyle and to get away from the 'hustle and bustle' of city living.

It was felt that creative workers have the flexibility to work from any location as long as facilities, most importantly a quality broadband connection, are available. The region's connectivity, both physical and virtual, was a concern for creative businesses; with improved transport infrastructure and communications considered top priorities. The lack of sufficient quality broadband services across many parts of the region was evident. There may, however, be a degree of tension between improvements in connectivity and a loss of the isolation or remoteness cited as a location factor by some creative individuals.

Creative people issues: All those interviewed believed a high level of creative talent existed in the region; however, both organizations and businesses reported finding it difficult to tap into this skills base and to know exactly who is operating in the sector in the region. Eight of the ten creative industries that reported having recently recruited staff found recruitment very or quite difficult, with creative technology sectors experiencing the greatest difficulty. This may reflect a preference for urban locations among those in the high-tech/ICT sector or a general shortage of such skills at the time of the survey. It was also noted that the creative workforce is highly mobile, creating positive flows of skills, ideas and creativity between the creative sector and other sectors, but also raising the challenge of retaining creative talent in a rural region.

Creative support issues: All businesses reported low levels of networking within the sector, with businesses typically operating in relative isolation, a trait shared with other rural enterprises in the region (WDC 2007). Only one in four creative businesses joined with others in the last year to deliver projects. Linkages with businesses in the wider economy were also limited, a situation that restricts the realization of the wider innovation benefits of creativity. It was also found that the often highly independent nature of those working in the creative sector can be an issue in relation to networking.

The majority of issues that emerged in the Western Region are consistent with findings from other rural regions as discussed previously (Burns and Kirkpatrick 2008; McGranahan and Wojan 2007; Regional Technology Strategies Inc. 2003, 2007). The importance of environmental and quality of life factors in attracting creative talent to a rural region emerged strongly, as did the constraints of a rural location on the operation of creative businesses, notably in the areas of infrastructure, accessibility and networking.

DEVELOPING THE WESTERN REGION'S CREATIVE SECTOR

The WDC made fourteen recommendations for developing the region's creative sector in *Creative West: The Creative Sector in the Western Region* (WDC 2009a). Among these was the need for an integrated national policy for the creative sector in the Republic of Ireland. Such a policy would provide a coherent structure for developing the sector, at both national and regional level. Developments to date have included the incorporation of the creative sector as a sector that can contribute to economic recovery in the Government's *Building Ireland's Smart Economy: A Framework for Sustainable Economic Renewal* (Government of Ireland 2008). The Arts Council also commissioned a study of the economic impact of the arts in Ireland (Indecon International Economic Consultants 2009), while the cultural sector emerged as a critical national asset at the Global Irish Economic Forum (Department of Foreign Affairs 2009). A national policy and strategy for the creative sector is likely to take some time, however, given its cross-departmental nature and current constraints on public expenditure.

At present there is minimal networking between creative industry businesses in the region. Increased networking is particularly important for operators of smaller businesses in rural areas who may be isolated (WDC 2007; Naylor 2007). Through networking and joint projects smaller operators are enabled to meet the demands of larger clients, to achieve economies of scale in marketing and distribution, and to increase opportunities for social and cultural interaction, an important location factor for the creative class (McGranahan and Wojan 2007; Florida 2002). The WDC recommended that a series of events be organized, and meeting hubs established, across the region to provide an opportunity for creative sector businesses to interact and establish informal networks. Awareness of how creativity and the outputs of the sector can enhance innovation and economic returns for all businesses is also relatively low. It was recommended to also organize events for business people from outside of the sector to interact with creative businesses, focusing on how creativity can help solve 'real world' problems.

In considering approaches to developing the Western Region's creative sector the limits to public intervention must also be acknowledged. Certain characteristics of the creative sector can impact on the effectiveness of public sector involvement; it is highly heterogeneous, composed of self-employed individuals or micro-enterprises, and has low levels of networking. During the creative business interviews a concern was expressed by several (mainly in the creative expression category) that public sector efforts to 'value' and 'develop' the sector could undermine its independence and indeed its essence. The most suitable approach for public intervention in the sector will likely vary between the creative expression, creative application and creative technology categories. While creative industries share many common traits, there are sufficient differences to justify differing approaches tailored to each category's needs.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience in the Western Region of Ireland is consistent with that found in other rural regions in the United Kingdom and United States (Experian and BOP Consulting 2006; McGranahan and Wojan 2007). Preserving the quality of life, landscape, built environment and natural heritage of a rural region appears to be critical in maintaining its attractiveness for creative people and businesses. Opportunities for social, cultural and business interaction between creative professionals can also play an important role in rural regions where isolation may be a problem and where there is a risk that creative talent could be lost to larger centres.

Another finding from the region is that connectivity, both physical and virtual, is fundamental to the operation of creative enterprises in rural locations. Currently, the region's creative sector is mainly serving local or national markets; it is likely that future growth of the sector will require an expansion of export activity, with increased connectivity key to this. There is a possibility, however, of tension arising if increased connectivity in rural regions impacts on their 'creative place' attributes.

While the creative sector presents an important opportunity for development of the rural economy, especially at a time when other economic sectors are suffering serious decline, public resources to support the sector are being cut. The budgets of the Arts Council, the arts departments of local authorities, cultural infrastructure investment funds and other funding sources for the creative sector have all been reduced (Houses of the Oireachtas 2009). Nevertheless, interest in this sector in the Republic of Ireland is growing and may lead to a more coherent national approach to developing a sector that presents considerable potential for future growth, both nationally and regionally. An important component of any such approach must be recognition of the potential role of the creative sector in the diversification of economic and employment opportunities in rural areas.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

White, P. (2010), 'Creative industries in a rural region: *Creative West*: The creative sector in the Western Region of Ireland', *Creative Industries Journal* 3: 1, pp. 79–88 doi: 10.1386/cij.3.1.79_1

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