



a future in the making

Why the crafts matter

An advocacy document for the craft sector
in Northern Ireland, 2007

We need to develop further our seedbed of talent and innovation by backing artistic entrepreneurs. We need to resource our arts organisations to act as catalysts for community development and regeneration as well as helping change the image of Northern Ireland internationally, as a confident and creative place in which to live, work and do business.

Rosemary Kelly, Chair, Arts Council of Northern Ireland

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Introduction

The craft sector in Northern Ireland is on the brink of major expansion.

With a fast developing, highly-skilled, hard working community of practitioners creating a diverse range of product from jewellery to furniture and using every channel of distribution at their disposal, this is a sector ripe for development.

There are more than 300 craft businesses in Northern Ireland, the workforce is young and the desire and capacity to expand and export has been highlighted in recent research.

The craft sector in northern ireland is on the brink of major expansion

G R O W T H

Improved integration of strategy and policy, increased collaboration, coordination and promotion are evident within the sector but there is a way to go Northern Ireland's craft sector needs to develop a stronger infrastructure to support its current workforce and to promote its opportunities to the broad array of people who are its future.

Economic Potential

The craft sector is poised for further development. The current sectoral turnover is estimated to be around £8million annually. With the assistance of appropriate interventions it is anticipated that the turnover could rise **to over £23 million**. This will require sectoral leadership, a coherent vision and strategy and 'buy-in' by the agencies involved in development.



Creative thought lies at the heart of almost all cultural activity ... it lies increasingly at the centre of successful economic life in an advanced knowledge-based economy. In the years ahead, people's creativity will increasingly be the key to a country's cultural identity, to its economic success and to individuals' well-being and sense of fulfilment. Successful societies in the 21st century will be those that nurture a spirit of creativity and foster the cultural activity which goes hand in hand with it.'



ALCHEMY

Innovation, Creativity and Economic Development

The world is becoming increasingly influenced by innovation and creative minds. Craft practitioners bring a special creativity to problem solving, design and production contributing to the development of competitive advantage in business. Increasingly, the private sector is looking to the cultural sector for new and innovative solutions to its needs.





Ards Crafts

Ards Crafts, the craft development function of Ards Borough Council, was established in 1996 to provide support to crafts businesses located within the Borough. The Council's first practical intervention was the establishment of an exemplar craft retail outlet with an experienced craft development manager to run it and lead the Council's development initiatives. In the years since, the number of craft businesses operating within the Borough has increased by 67%, businesses employing people have grown to 39% of the total and 45% of sales for craft businesses located within the Ards area are generated from customers outside Northern Ireland.

Ards Crafts believes that local councils can make important contributions to craft sector development; in particular, helping to increase local visibility to customers by ensuring that the strategic orientation of craft businesses reflects, for example, trends in the general consumer market and ensuring that the mechanisms for business development are accessible to craft entrepreneurs by providing local facilities, initiatives, signposting and advice services.

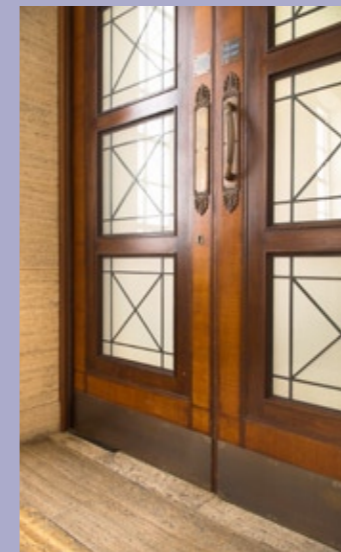
Ards Crafts recognises the need for a coherent strategic vision for the sector that includes recognition of trends in consumer markets and provides a common support structure for craft entrepreneurs across Northern Ireland.

Flowerfield Arts Centre

With a long-held interest in organising and promoting craft activities, Flowerfield Arts Centre in Portstewart continues to develop as a centre of excellence for craft. With classes in silversmithing, ceramics and glass-making taught by highly skilled artists, Flowerfield provides a focus on lifelong learning for members of the local community as well as a degree of creative skill and awareness that is continually developing.

Flowerfield boasts 4 professional artist studios and in 2007-08 is hosting ceramicist Adam Frew on the Craft NI *making it* scheme. The centre plans to develop a specialism in glass-making over the coming years and to allocate studio space to glass-makers. Its exhibition programme has featured craft of international standing and the annual exhibition of the work of students from the centre is widely acclaimed.

Malcolm Murchison, Flowerfield Arts Centre director is optimistic about the future: *'Craft NI's making it initiative and forthcoming international exchange programme are making a tremendous difference to the craft sector in Northern Ireland, bringing a degree of professionalism that we need for the further development of the sector. We plan to capitalise on our location in one of the most beautiful parts of Northern Ireland, promoting the work of our artists commercially to the growing number of tourists who visit this area'*.



Local Decision Making

Northern Ireland expects that devolution will deliver more of the things its people need and want. Administrative power resting with locally elected politicians implies better decisions based upon local needs.

The craft sector is looking forward to positive and effective change. Craft NI and other representative groups are preparing to work in partnership with the Assembly and its institutions. They are confident that with local politicians they will assist in generating further capacity and contribute to a renewed society, bringing unique skills to bear in building a creative and imaginative workforce.



COMMUNITIES



Eleanor Wheeler

Based in County Down, Eleanor Wheeler studied ceramics at Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen. She has an MA in 3D design, specialising in ceramics from Cardiff, and completed her PhD in site-specific architectural ceramics at the University of Northumbria in 1996.

Eleanor's specialism lies in designing and making large-scale ceramic and brick sculptural features for architectural/public spaces. All of her work is site-specific and is designed in response to the site and environment and in consultation with architects and local communities.

The aim of her work has been to inform the design process while giving individuals the opportunity to develop skills and have an input into improving their local public spaces. Many of these projects have resulted in the creation of large-scale permanent artworks.

Eleanor's work has been commissioned by hospital trusts, local councils, education boards, museums, further education colleges, national charities as well as private clients.

Eleanor has been Artist in Residence in Belfast City Council's Urban Development Section since April 2005.

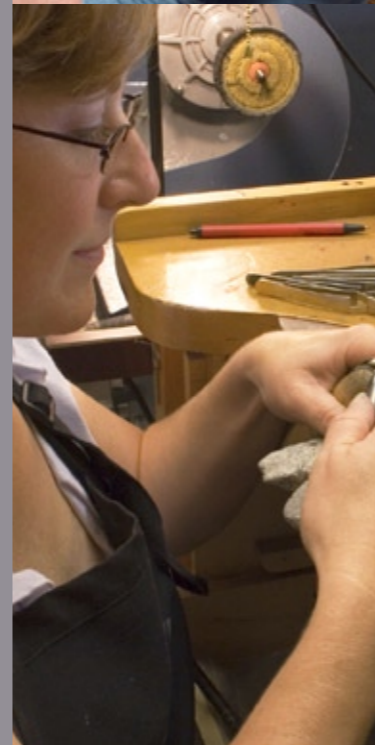
Earthform Ceramics

Karen and Claire Gibson and their friend Zona Crilly studied ceramics at the University of Ulster. By second year they had recognised that if they wanted a career in ceramics they would have to start their own business.

With an MA to help them determine what a commercial opportunity in ceramics might mean for them the hunt for premises took them to Townsend Street Enterprise Park. With Zona on board, support from Invest NI and the Prince's Trust, Earthform Ceramics opened its doors in February 2001. Then the challenge changed; the focus on acquiring start-up resources was replaced by the need to create a model that would sustain the business.

Offering a range of distinct skills endowed the business with flexibility. The ability to quickly provide a creative response and the capacity to deliver against short-timescales took on particular importance when domestic pottery production was rejected as the core opportunity. Over time the partners have developed their business by targeting specialist markets including corporate gifts, awards and trophies, decorative ceramics and even some specialist domestic pottery.

Earthform is now an established business defined and sustained not only by the creativity of the partners but also by the flexibility and responsiveness they have brought to the marketplace.



Who are our craft practitioners?

The contemporary craft sector is broad and diverse. It encompasses practitioners of many kinds – designer-makers, applied artists, artists and designers who design and prototype for commercial manufacture, for the built environment and those working to a client brief or commission in the public and private sectors.

Employment

The craft sector employs over 500 people in Northern Ireland. Most are self-employed; recent research shows that the dominant ambition of over 80% of them is to expand their business and the sector is confident that they can develop strategies to do so.

Women into Work

More than two thirds of craft practitioners are female and the entrepreneurial spirit is strong within this grouping. Craft as a business and lifestyle choice provides an opportunity for flexible working and allows female makers to capitalise on their skills while working from home and exploiting commercial opportunity via local outlets and, internationally, via the Internet.

PROFILE OF THE SECTOR

69% of makers are aged **25-49**

68% are **female**

57% work **full-time** (59% female; 41% male)

68% are **exporters**

34% sell on the **Internet**

68% live and work in a **rural** location

73% of businesses are **less than 10 years** old

78% of those founded since 2000 are **owned by females**

56% have taken a **full-time** art or design **course**

80% of makers are aiming to **expand** their business

62% had worked in **another** part of the **economy**

BUILT ENVIRONMENT



making it - Craft NI's business incubation programme

making it is all about supporting designer-makers as they take their first steps towards establishing sustainable craft businesses. Established in 2005, *making it* now has 14 participants working with 12 host organisations who, along with Craft NI, deliver business advice, guidance and practical support including: -

- rent-free work space
- maintenance support
- specialised/media-specific equipment
- access to exhibitions and selling events
- participation in marketing and publicity programmes.

By building a network of organisations within the programme with the expertise to support developing craft businesses and to generate a market for the specialist work of local designer-makers, ultimately, more new businesses will be supported than Craft NI and the *making it* scheme could ever hope to reach.

making it is raising the profile of Northern Ireland as a centre of innovative, contemporary practice in craft, design and applied arts and has already attracted two designer-makers to return to Northern Ireland to establish their businesses. It focuses attention on the contribution the sector makes to the economy, and recognises the sector's record in enterprise development (particularly by women) and in supporting the sustainability of rural communities.

making it is a model of best practice in craft enterprise development.

Craft NI is the sectoral development lead body for the craft industry in Northern Ireland. It supports individuals working in the sector in the development of their creative practice and fosters economic opportunity by promoting the need for investment in infrastructure for craft businesses; the development of the market for contemporary crafts is a priority. It works to ensure holistic and coordinated education and training for practitioners with the long-term aim of raising standards and faces outwards to the market with the firm aim of establishing an international profile for contemporary crafts from Northern Ireland.



**ADVOCACY AND PROFILING
PARTNERSHIPS
QUALITY
INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH**



“Since June 2005 Craft NI and its partners have been actively supporting the development of the sector in Northern Ireland. Key initiatives such as *making it* - our business incubation programme - international exhibitions, a regional web site, continuing professional development seminars and vital industry intelligence and research have all contributed to building an impetus for sectoral growth. Craft NI will continue to build partnerships that drive the future success of craft businesses and create an opportunity environment for designer-makers in a contemporary, vibrant and entrepreneurial craft industry”.

Joe Kelly
Director, Craft Northern Ireland

BUSINESS EXPERTISE



Ballydougan Pottery

Award-winning Ballydougan Pottery is based in Bloomvale House, Gilford, County Down, an historic thatched house built in 1785 by a Huguenot family involved in the linen industry. With a long history in craft, it was fitting that its present owner Sean O'Dowd on buying the property proceeded to reinstate and conserve Bloomvale House and its outbuildings as a centre of excellence for craft. The complex now boasts a pottery studio, gift shop, coffee shop and self-catering cottages and employs 15 people.

With pottery the catalyst for its ongoing development and plans for new areas of diversification, as well as the further development of additional self-catering cottages, this thriving business is poised to address the growing cultural tourism market.



Nora Watson

Nora majored in jewellery design at university and decided early on to establish her own business. Out of college she initially worked part time with another jeweller sharing the risk and building up commercial experience; the rest of the week she concentrated on her own designs building up her retail customer base to the point where income was large enough, in 2004, to enable her to convert outbuildings on the family farm into a studio/workshop and gallery.

The opening of this dedicated retail space moved the business into another phase of development, expanding the local trade and introducing Nora's designs to the holidaymaker market as the Ards tourism opportunity grew.

Responding to direct sales and to a growing commissions business has created significant manufacturing pressures but despite this, Nora has been able to maintain her third-party retail presence by focusing on the 8 most significant accounts across the UK and Ireland and in Oregon. In addition, she has built on the outreach ability of the Internet to supply direct to customers around the world.

With both these business streams now bedded down, Nora's aim is to grow by turning her focus once again onto the development of her retail customer base.

Cultural Tourism

The craft sector provides a base for a cultural tourism development opportunity which has been recognised by tourism agencies, local authorities and cultural sector lead bodies. The network of arts centres, high quality urban retail outlets and regionally-spread small businesses offer increasing visibility for makers and have the potential for direct and immediate sales as well as promotional opportunities which can be followed up by Internet trading.

The long-term development of Northern Ireland's 'cultural tourism' approach is set to usher in a wave of new tourism development opportunities. The craft sector has yet to tap into the economic potential of this growth.



Rural Development

The development of more sustainable, diversified, enterprising rural economies and communities is a necessity in the face of a decline in agriculture as the primary economic driver in rural areas. To achieve growth, rural areas need business activities which produce rural exports: goods and services that can be traded outside rural areas. The craft sector can make a significant contribution to rural economic diversification.

Two thirds of craft practitioners already live and work in rural locations contributing to their local economies and taking advantage of lifestyle choices and opportunities: -

- **New craft enterprise development is amongst the fastest growing of any business segment in Northern Ireland**
- **Craft has a specific relationship with tourism that contributes to the visitor opportunity**
- **Craft enterprise is attractive to women and allows them to continue to be economically active when family responsibilities might otherwise take them out of the work force**
- **The existence of craft businesses in the countryside can contribute to village renewal and development**
- **Craft with its focus on the aesthetic can contribute to and take advantage of the new focus on conservation.**



Made in Northern Ireland

The Rediscover Northern Ireland programme at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Washington DC, 2007, offered Craft NI the opportunity to present its first major international exhibition of contemporary craft from Northern Ireland. The exhibition was hosted in Washington DC by the Smithsonian Institution confirming the international calibre of the makers and their work.

Made in Northern Ireland profiled the work of 9 established, individual makers currently practising in Northern Ireland. The pieces included work in silver, glass, ceramics, textiles and jewellery. The breadth of contemporary practice was illustrated by two projects from INTERFACE (Research Centre for Art, Technologies and Design at the University of Ulster), Reinventing Linen and Contemporary Souvenir. Both projects explored traditional images of Northern Ireland and historical craft practice and reinterpreted these through contemporary design and manufacturing processes.

It is a core aim of Craft NI to establish and develop an international profile for the Northern Ireland craft sector including through international exhibitions and trade shows. Individual practitioners and businesses will be encouraged and supported in internationalising their work and promoting Northern Ireland as a centre for high quality craft.

Jeremy Suffern

Jeremy returned to Northern Ireland after studying furniture design in England and set up his own design and manufacturing facility in 1998.

As Jeremy says, *"When I returned to Northern Ireland none of the local furniture-makers were doing the sort of work I wanted to do. 'Contemporary' was not in style and price dominated the market. If I was to achieve the career goals I had set for myself, it had to be on my own."*

Looking forward Jeremy believes that contemporary furniture is now 'in vogue' and with younger people having more disposable income and a willingness to commission special pieces he believes the market for the designer craftsman's work has opened up. *"It's still relatively niche", he says, "but there's now an opportunity if you can deliver the design and the quality the customer wants to buy. Exclusive is now something meaningful for the customer"*.

Unfortunately, Northern Ireland is a small market. If government wants to do something positive for the designer-maker of high quality bespoke products it should take the opportunity to promote NI designers outside NI in markets where high levels of disposable income and a desire for unique products are significantly larger.



Internationalising Northern Ireland

Craft NI's exhibition of contemporary craft *Made in Northern Ireland: A Dynamic of Change* (Washington DC, June 07) established an international platform for high quality work by makers in Northern Ireland. Craft NI will use such opportunities, as well as those offered by international craft and design shows, to raise awareness of Northern Irish products and design, support the development of international markets and contribute to developing the image of Northern Ireland abroad.

Education & Training for Craft Entrepreneurs

Craft NI recognises the need to support and provide appropriate leadership in relation to the broad and varied education and training landscape which underpins the growth of the craft sector in Northern Ireland. The transition from student to entrepreneur requires a skills base which is constantly changing in order to meet market demand locally, nationally and internationally. In this vein, Craft NI will continue to develop specific bespoke training programmes to meet the needs of practitioners. It will work locally and nationally with the Creative & Cultural Sector Skills Council and encourage the formal education system to incorporate customer and market-focused approaches to further develop the craft workforce of the future.



County Down Crafts

County Down Crafts was formed in 1997 with initial assistance from Down District Council. It is a networking organisation which provides a range of services to craft practitioners including the production of a newsletter, a website, event organisation and registration with Craftmark, a cross-border economic development initiative between County Down Crafts and Louth County Enterprise Board. County Down Crafts has recently opened a high profile retail outlet and gallery (Space Craft) in the centre of Belfast.

Jan Irwin, Director says *“County Down Crafts is a networking organisation run ‘by the maker, for the maker’. We aim to assist designer-makers / artists to build their businesses and to make money through a series of targeted events spread throughout the year. Our networking approach has allowed practitioners of all ages and levels of experience to meet and share their expertise and the ‘clustering’ effect of many businesses working together has strengthened our profile of the individuals, the organisation and the sector.”*



The Buttermarket

The Buttermarket originally opened as a craft studio and retail complex with funding from Fermanagh District Council in 1991. Currently 15 full-time artists and designer-makers are working together to promote their products and services throughout and beyond Co Fermanagh, particularly to the growing community of tourists. The individual studios are all open for business and products and services can be bought direct from the individual artists and makers.

Anne McNulty, who designs and makes fine hand-thrown white stoneware pottery, points out that The Buttermarket is one of only 3 craft workshop/retail complexes on the island of Ireland and is generally considered to have been ahead of its time. The retail opportunity represented by The Buttermarket is a model for further local authority development throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.



INITIATIVES

Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Colleges of Further & Higher Education
Crafts Council of Ireland / Crafts Council (London)
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Environment & Heritage Service
Invest Northern Ireland
Local Enterprise Agencies
National Museums Northern Ireland
The National Trust
Northern Ireland Tourist Board
Regional Tourism Partnerships

ADVOCACY AND PROFILING

Web Site Development

Online marketplace for Northern Irish craft

Touring Exhibitions

Contemporary and traditional craft exhibitions

Craft Week

Annual programme of region-wide events promoting the craft sector

National and International trade fairs

Marketing and publicity

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

ACNI, INI/DETI

ACNI, NMNI, galleries, local government arts centres, EHS, DARD, TNT, crafts councils

Local government arts centres, galleries, FEHE colleges, craft networks, LEAs, NMNI, TNT

INI, ACNI, crafts councils, local government, NITB/RTPs, NMNI

PARTNERSHIPS & REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Local Craft Partnerships

Developing local opportunities and activities

local government, DARD, FEHE colleges, RTPs, craft networks,

Regional Craft Network Forum

Development of sectoral dialogue, needs analysis, local delivery

craft networks, designer-makers

FEHE Forum and Creative & Cultural Sector Skills Council

FEHE colleges and universities, craft networks, designer-makers

QUALITY

Professional Development

Business and creative workshops / seminars

ACNI, DCAL, INI, DARD, DEL, Creative & Cultural Sector Skills Council, crafts councils, FEHE colleges and universities

making it - business incubation

International Residencies

ACNI, DCAL, INI, DEL, LEAs
British Council, Culture Ireland, FEHE colleges and universities

Economic development programmes

Export, cultural tourism, rural development

INI, InterTrade Ireland, LEAs, DARD, NITB/RTPs

INTELLIGENCE & RESEARCH

Labour Market Intelligence

Creative & Cultural Sector Skills Council, DEL, craft networks, designer-makers

Market data

INI, InterTrade Ireland, crafts councils

Socio-economic survey

ACNI, DCAL, INI, DEL, DARD



Golddigger79

Dr Sarah McAleer set up GoldDigger79 on her return to Northern Ireland in 2004. After a first degree in Jewellery and Silversmithing at Glasgow School of Art and a PhD at the Royal College of Art, Sarah joined the staff of the College and researched and lectured there until her return to Northern Ireland.

After initially locating at the Belfast Gas Works site, GoldDigger79 moved to its current location in 2006. It provides studio facilities that are home to four designer-makers (all of whom have been trained to degree level locally) working under Sarah's direction. Together with a substantial retail area (showing the work of 60 designers) it provides the base for a commercial opportunity that has doubled since the move to Holywood.

For the future, Sarah has mapped out a plan that recognises the need to build the potential customer base and to balance expansion, through additional Northern Ireland retail opportunities and exports, with the needs of the designer-maker for creative stimulus and time and space to work. As Sarah says, "things are changing ... it is a positive time to be part of the craft sector in Northern Ireland".

Rachel McKnight

Rachel McKnight set up her workshop in Lurgan in September 2003 after graduating from the University of Ulster. The sourcing and experimentation with new materials is at the core of Rachel's original and innovative jewellery.

Her jewellery comprises necklaces, bangles, earrings and rings forming quirky creations in plastic and rubber. Rachel says, 'plastics interest me because of their many manufacturing possibilities and multitude of colours. This gives me endless options for my work. I like the idea of transparency and opaque colour, and plastics allow me to explore this.'

In July 2005 Rachel won 1st prize in the Jewellery - Alternative Materials section of the RDS National Craft Awards. She has been selected to show her work in Origin (the London Craft Fair), Somerset House, London in October 2007 and in SOFA (Sculpture Objects and Functional Art) in Chicago in November 2007. Rachel supplies retail outlets in England, Scotland, Wales and the USA with her work. She aims to continue to develop retail sales and to produce large works for exhibition and for collectors of jewellery.



Future Priorities

Craft NI aims to build creativity and profitability within an innovative, entrepreneurial and vibrant craft sector in Northern Ireland through an integrated strategy, actively supported by regional and local stakeholders.

To do this we will prioritise:

- Effective partnerships for focusing regional strategy and underpinning local delivery
- Development of infrastructure to support improved capacity both for individual businesses and support organisations
- High quality, creative practice
- Development of markets at home and abroad
- Support for businesses seeking to address new opportunities for growth and investment
- An increased profile for the sector through improved web presence and access to international craft, applied art and design platforms.

Craft Sector Stakeholders

ARTS AND CULTURE

Arts Council NI
 Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
 National Museums NI
 Arts centres & galleries
 British Council
 The National Trust
 Local government arts and civic infrastructure
 Environment and Heritage Service

BUSINESS & ECONOMY

Invest NI / Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Local government
 LEADER companies
 Local Enterprise Agencies
 Tourism
 Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
 Public / private retail outlets

SKILLS AND TRAINING

Department for Employment and Learning
 Universities
 Colleges of Further & Higher Education
 Creative & Cultural Sector Skills Council
 Education & Skills Authority / Department of Education
 Schools & community groups

Funders





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