



There was this great meeting of a major historical moment, Suez, and the BBC's impartiality coming into question  
**The Hour** writer Abi Morgan, **In Focus**, page 31

ECONOMIC IMPACT

# Location, location, location

With Northern Ireland welcoming back fantasy drama *Game Of Thrones* for its second series, Will Strauss looks at the huge economic benefits drama production can bring to a region



Game Of Thrones: fantasy drama starring Sean Bean is returning to Northern Ireland for its second series

When it was announced last month that production of HBO/Sky medieval fantasy drama *Game Of Thrones* would return to Northern Ireland for series two, there was rejoicing throughout the province. And not just from fans of the show but in the corridors of political power at Stormont, in the post houses of Hollywood, in the pubs of the Titanic Quarter and beyond.

"Securing the filming of the second series is another coup for our local creative industry and will deliver major economic benefits," said Northern Ireland enterprise minister Arlene Foster.

She's not wrong. Series one of the show, according to reliable sources, brought £17m to Northern Ireland and created about 800 jobs. In total, 60% of the 480-strong crew used on the show were resident in Northern Ireland and countless Northern Irish extras were employed. It's a monster of a production, and with no let-up in scale, series two should realise similar numbers.

It's little wonder that the people charged with promoting and developing a region or nation see drama production as hugely appealing. While

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feature films are attractive in terms of profile, drama strikes a nice balance between volume and budget, with £750,000 per episode still common.

Drama is also mobile. While a story can require specific locations, some places in the narrative can be substituted for lookalikes. And, importantly, if you can get a returning series, it's a strong platform around which to build a local industry.

The figures tell the story. According to Northern Film & Media (NF&M) the 26 hours of *Vera*, *United*, *Inspector George Gently* (right), *Joe Maddison's War* and *Tracy Beaker Returns* brought a local spend of £6m to the north-east.

On a more specific level, in Yorkshire, Revolution Films' *Red Riding* trilogy for Channel 4 had a total local spend on crew and facilities, plus accommodation, hotels, taxis, catering and the like, that topped £2.5m.

Another C4 drama shot in Yorkshire, *This Is*

*England '86*, had a total budget of £2.4m, of which £1.1m was spent regionally. That rough 50/50 spend split is not uncommon, although it jumps to a required 70% for regional programming. If you're wondering where the rest goes, invariably, it returns from whence it came.

"Post-production is very hard to keep in the region," says Screen Yorkshire chief executive Sally Joynson. "It's a big issue. A London-based director will invariably want to do the post in London. And then, you've got London post houses investing in production." She cites the example of Soho's *Lip Sync*, which gave backing to *Red Riding*.

Ultimately, most of the decisions on location come down to script and budget. The former is difficult to influence, but it is possible to do something about the latter. And, right now, drama needs all the finance it can get.

For example, Screen Yorkshire put £300,000

into *Red Riding*, while NF&M spent £390,000 on its drama slate.

Unfortunately, however, with the demise of the regional development agencies, screen agencies in England can no longer easily apply for investment funding. But those in other nations certainly can.

"Because we are devolved, we have more freedom to put the case for funding and incentives," says Richard Williams, chief executive of Northern Ireland Screen (NIS), who spent two years working with HBO to secure *Game Of Thrones*.

"But, like everything else, it's about helping them work through the costs and presenting the value proposition, but also why it's cost-effective. And that includes the fact that we're around 25% cheaper than the south-east of England when it comes to building, hotels, transport and so on."

*Game Of Thrones* series one (including the pilot) received £3.6m in funding from NIS, supported by Invest NI and part-funded by the

European Regional Development Fund. Williams says the amount spent this time around won't be as high, but will still be significant.

That it is a returning series is crucial for sustainability and developing a crew base but, if a long-running drama is lost through being axed, moved or 'mothballed', it can be painful. Newcastle lost *Wire In The Blood*, Yorkshire lost *Heartbeat*, and Bristol is about to lose *Casualty*. The BBC medical drama has been based in the city since it launched in 1986. This year, the show moves to Cardiff as part of the BBC's plan to make the Welsh city a "sustainable centre of excellence for drama".

### Casualty of relocation

A study commissioned by Bristol City Council and South West Screen (SWS) found that the total financial impact of *Casualty* leaving Bristol amounts to £25m a year, with just over half of that directly related to the production of the show. It's a big blow but, luckily, not an insurmountable one.

To counteract the loss of *Casualty*, SWS, in conjunction with the South West Regional Development Agency and Bristol City Council, switched its attention to turning an old bottle yard into a 300,000 sq ft facility that would attract production to the region.

The Bottle Yard, as it has become, was the location for *Five Daughters* (BBC) as well as *Dirk Gently* (BBC) and *Trollied* (Sky), and it is certainly helping to make up the shortfall.

"To have The Bottle Yard up and running before *Casualty* leaves Bristol gives us a very strong proposition," says SWS production services manager Fiona Francombe. "I hope it will stop crews having to leave to find work elsewhere."

Losing a show like that is an experience that NIS may need to be aware of, should *Game Of Thrones* not make it beyond series two.

"NI has to be robust enough to cope with the end of a long-running series," declares Williams. "We're not running a strategy that is exclusively based on *Game Of Thrones* - that would be an act of insanity. We push very hard to have a broad portfolio. That said, it would be incredibly difficult to replace *Game Of Thrones*, especially like-for-like."

£17m  
 Amount series one of Game Of Thrones injected into the NI economy

### CULT LOCATIONS PROS AND CONS

Tourism can also benefit from TV production, especially when the location used is identifiable on-screen and the portrayal is positive.

Cult shows or those that are part of a wider historical, literary or cinematic brand are the biggest draws.

Wales has certainly benefited, with Barry Island, location for *Gavin And Stacey* and *Being Human* (below, both BBC), and Cardiff, home of *Doctor Who*, attracting 3.1 million visitors between them each year.

Location manager Ben Hepworth, who recently sourced shooting venues in Leeds for Channel 4 comedy-drama *Sirens*, says he has noticed an increase in the touting of locations in recent years.

"Apartment owners who can't find tenants now email us to offer them up as locations on short-term lets," he says. "The city and town councils have also become more proactive in facilitating filming. They all seem to be more aware of the benefits that filming can bring."

Which is great when it's positive. But there can be negatives, too, especially when there is a perception that an on-screen portrayal is unrepresentative of that location.

### Geordie backlash

Lime Pictures-produced structured reality shows *The Only Way Is Essex* and *Geordie Shore* are cases in point. *Geordie Shore* prompted a 20,000-strong Facebook page slamming the show, a 4,000-signature petition to its broadcaster MTV, and the launch of a website, www.geordie-pride.com, set up specifically to counteract its supposed negative portrayal.

The rage at *TOWIE*'s portrayal of Essex even turned violent when locals attacked a van being used by the equipment rental company HotCam during production.

Tony Wood, the executive producer of both series, says these are extreme reactions. "I believe we're pretty representative of a fairly large segment of the young people in both of those places," he says. "Of course it's absurd to say Newcastle and Essex are just like that, but there are a lot of people that we are being very representative of."

