

Comparative Study of New Writing Support in the UK

SUMMARY VERSION

A. Introduction

In late 2006 Script Yorkshire learnt its ‘Routes To Sustainability’ Grants for the Arts application to ACE Yorkshire had been successful. The aim of the project – now nearing completion – was to map out a sustainable future for the organisation. This study of Playwrights Network organisations was intended as a benchmarking exercise, enabling Script Yorkshire to distinguish its own model for new writing support and to develop a cohesive programme of work.

Script Yorkshire (www.scriptyorkshire.co.uk) is a registered charity and membership organisation. It is the ACE Yorkshire region’s only support and advocacy organisation for committed playwrights and scriptwriters which operates at a region-wide and strategic level.

The **Playwrights Network** is a loose affiliation of regional organisations which work to develop playwrights (and sometimes writers in other media too) across the UK. It is curated by Jonathan Meth and Sarah Dickenson of writernet, a UK-based charitable organisation with a national remit to “provide dramatic writers with the tools they need to build better careers and redefine the culture in which they work” (www.writernet.co.uk).

At the time of writing, the Playwrights Network consists of the following organisations:

Name	Arts Council Nation or Region
New Writing North	ACE North East
North West Playwrights	ACE North West
Script	ACE West Midlands
Script Yorkshire	ACE Yorkshire
East Midlands Theatre Writing Partnership	ACE East Midlands
New Writing South	ACE South
Menagerie	ACE East
South West New Writing Network	ACE South West
Sherman Cymru	Arts Council of Wales
Playwrights Studio, Scotland	Scottish Arts Council
Tinderbox	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Soho Theatre and Writers Centre	ACE London
Writernet	UK

With the sole exception of the South West New Writing Network (SWNWN), each is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee, governed by a board of trustees. The SWNWN is, in the words of co-ordinator Sarah Dickenson “a project, not an organisation.” It is a partnership between writernet and Theatre South West.

The organisations identified by Jonathan and invited to join the Playwrights Network vary by size of income, level and type of Arts Council support and scope of activity. There are three broad templates of organisational structure in the regions:

- The **theatre** – new writing companies identified as operating in a strategic way to serve an entire region i.e. Menagerie Theatre (ACE East), Sherman Cymru (Arts Council of Wales), Tinderbox Theatre (Arts Council of Northern Ireland), Soho Theatre and Writers Centre (ACE London).
- The **membership organisation** – in which the members are key to the governance of the organisation, with the power to elect and remove trustees i.e. Script Yorkshire (ACE Yorkshire), New Writing South (ACE South).
- The **‘agency’** -- an independent charitable organisation established as the result of some strategic thinking i.e. New Writing North (ACE North), Script (ACE West Midlands), East Midlands Theatre Writing Partnership (ACE East Midlands), Playwrights Studio, Scotland (Scottish Arts Council), North West Playwrights (ACE North West).

Special Cases:

- The South West New Writing Network is a *project* hosted by writernet to serve the ACE South West region in response to the perceived lack of strategic support for new writing.
- Writernet maintains a strategic overview of new writing provision across the UK, for example in the South East through its Hydroponic programme around cultural diversity, by supporting Script in the West Midlands as it undergoes organisational refocusing, and in Yorkshire by setting up the Yorkshire Theatre Writing Network, bringing playwrights and cultural operators together from across the region.

B. Research Findings:

New Writing North (NWN) is the leviathan with annual income in 2007 of £605,789. A more typical income range for agencies and membership organisations in that year was between £185,442 (Theatre Writing Partnership) and £61,534 (Script), with the level of Arts Council funding tending towards 55%-70%.

However, the proportion of income derived from Arts Council sources is less significant in determining the long-term stability of a PN organisation than the success with which it has embedded additional long-term funding partners. This was the **key finding of the study** and the only real exception was New Writing South (NWS), for whom a variety of self-generated income sources fulfilled this function.

Script Yorkshire is the only PN organisation not to have **dedicated office space** – perhaps as a result of this the proportion of its income devoted to staffing costs is at the higher end of the scale. Two organisations had an **online searchable writers’ database** (*Pirandello* at NWS and *Talent Pool* at writernet) with the rest holding writers’ contact details electronically in-house, sometimes together with their script reports. Four offered significantly useful, **open-access information resources** for writers on their websites (NWN, NWS, Soho and writernet). The rest had a links page or limited themselves to information about their own activities. With two notable exceptions (North West Playwrights and NWS) **hardcopy newsletters** have all but

disappeared. NWP, TWP and Menagerie are the only PN organisations not to issue **regular e-bulletins** but all send emails to writers on their lists from time to time.

Soho, NWP, TWP, NWS, Menagerie, Playwrights Studio Scotland, Sherman Cymru and Tinderbox all regard their **script reading service** as an important entry point for writers into their development programmes; with the exception of Soho, they handle 100-300 submissions a year. **Mentoring schemes** are common but low volume and usually the mentees are selected or emerge as candidates via their participation in other development work.

These **progression routes** – by which a writer can move between script feedback, tailored workshops, access to showcases and performance, mentoring and perhaps ultimately a commission – are typical of the way the most confident PN organisations operate.

Competitions, bursaries and prizes are rarer and only really kick in once an organisation has reached the point where it can access corporate, ‘branded’ sponsorship. Annual **new writing festivals** are a popular way of showcasing new work and most regions have one.

Targeted outreach provision is aimed at schools, young writers (18-25) and “the third sector” (i.e. community organisations, with particular emphasis on the voiceless and excluded) though not every PN organisation is active in every category. Once again, the most successful model of provision seems to involve a range of targeted and open access projects which feed into invitation-only workshops, showcases, mentoring etc when talent is identified.

Overwhelmingly, the favoured way of working was to deliver programmes of activity via **partnerships**. For example: “*During the year 2006/7 we worked in partnership with Brighton and Hove Council’s Celebrating Age Project, the Global Grants Project, the Specialist Schools Trust, Farnham Maltings, Literature Training, the Nightingale Theatre Brighton, BBC Southern Counties Radio, Times newspapers, Jubilee Library Brighton, University of Sussex, Yvonne Arnaud Theatre Guildford, Writernet, Blatchington Mill School, NAWE.*” (New Writing South)

PN organisations were active in a wide range of **international projects** and partnerships in 2007. And NWN, Menagerie, Sherman Cymru, Soho and Tinderbox either **published play scripts** themselves or worked with publishers such as Oberon to do so.

Finally, it was noticeable that the organisations that lacked RFO status (writernet, Menagerie and Script Yorkshire) placed correspondingly greater emphasis on the importance of **self-generated income** – as did NWS which has only just acquired RFO status. But every single PN organisation which responded to the questionnaire cited ‘funding’ as the key issue facing them.

Clearly then, there is no coherent national approach with regard to new writing support agencies and the type of support a promising writer will be able to access is very much dependent on a postcode lottery. Script Yorkshire, as an organisation, takes seriously its commitment to “widening participation in the writing for performance and broadcasting industries by all sections of the community” and is bound to regard this patchy and unequal provision with some concern.

C. Conclusions and Recommendations

At the outset of Script Yorkshire's 'Routes to Sustainability project' we hoped our research would uncover sources of income which might be used to support core costs and subsidise the membership operation. But in the light of this study, we can be confident in asserting that -- with the exception of Menagerie's sophisticated corporate workshop programme and Soho's income from commercial property -- no such sources exist. Over time it might be possible to develop a corporate arm but if we are to remain focussed on our core remit of supporting new writing and widening participation in employment in the writing for performance and broadcast industries there is, in the end, no real substitute for ACE revenue funding; albeit in long-term partnership with an additional minority funder such as a local authority.

The Playwrights Network:

This is a working document, intended to identify existing elements of good practise within Playwrights Network organisations in order to map out a sustainable future for Script Yorkshire. However, I believe the dim outlines of an enhanced role for the Playwrights' Network are also beginning to emerge:

1. An enhanced role in making information resources available nationally, via a hardcopy journal and the provision of timely online resources. This would free up regional organisations to concentrate on what they do best – for example, developing and advocating for writers in their areas and supplying information of local relevance without duplication.
2. Playing a co-ordinating role with respect to new writing festivals – making sure they don't clash, increasing awareness by providing a national calendar of events and working to ensure we are better represented at each other's festivals so there is more interplay and dialogue between regions.
3. Continuing the practice of regular meetings which encourage PN organisations to take a step back from project delivery and think strategically about the bigger trends and issues.

Script Yorkshire:

1. **Funding Partners.** What counts towards long-term stability and a sustained level of Arts Council funding is the establishment of a long-term relationship with an additional key funding partner such as a local authority. Though even with this additional support Arts Council funding of PN organisations still amounts typically to 60%-70% of income.

Script Yorkshire is now in a position to make a strong case to ACE Yorkshire that it needs to be comparably funded with other PN organisations. It makes sense for Script Yorkshire to seek out local authority partners in districts where the existing infrastructure for new writing support is weak (notably, but by no means limited to, parts of South Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire). In an ideal world this support would include element to support our core costs and which is not tied to project work. But no such long-term funding partners have as yet, specifically, been identified and they may not exist in the fragmented Yorkshire context.

However, uniquely amongst PN organisations, SY is evolving a grassroots branch structure. This has been in response to the region's challenging geography but it makes it easier for us to access smaller, community-based pots of money such as Awards for All on a town-by-town basis. If it is not possible to identify a major long-term funding partner, a portfolio of small-scale funding sources and local partnerships might fulfil the same purpose.

2. **Delivery Partners.** Partners for project delivery are, to an extent, a different matter from funding partners; and with funding levels tied closely to delivery it is frequently impossible to generate a surplus – or even claw back the entirety of one's core costs, as more than one PN respondent pointed out. However, the benefits of partnership working include avoiding the duplication of effort, generating additional resources for the organisation, complementing our own knowledge, skills and capacity and reaching out effectively to targeted communities. All the most successful PN organisations emphasised the importance of partnership working and we will continue to build upon the work of our Routes To Sustainability project which has been key to raising our profile in the region and identifying partners for delivery.

Outreach project work is a good thing in itself and on the basis of exploratory work completed this year, our potential long-term delivery partners include Sheffield Hallam University, Screen Yorkshire and the BBC (grassroots and outreach work for Northern Exposure). The region's vibrant calendar of literature festivals offers another hopeful route, as do small venues and small-scale producing companies, and we will continue, as long as funding permits, to work in partnership with literature training, writernet, the Playwrights Network and the Yorkshire Theatre Writers' Network.

3. **Self-generated income from events.** Until such time as Script Yorkshire achieves revenue funding status it will be dependent upon self-generated income to cover its administrative costs. In the long term it might be possible to develop a series of branded corporate workshops along the lines of Menagerie Theatre. (This corporate programme does, unambiguously, deliver a surplus whose aim is to subsidise Menagerie's new writing remit.)

Another route might be to develop a schools-and-education programme and a series of off-the-shelf workshops which can be bought in by local festivals and library services. But the experience of NWS informs us that if these are to have integrity they will take time to set up and we will need to be confident we have a sufficiently stable infrastructure to develop relationships of trust and for delivery in the long term. They will also have to be keenly priced which means, although they will be a valuable resource to the region, they will not generate a surplus.

4. **Membership.** It is membership subscriptions from writers that offer the most immediate potential for a surplus of self-generated income that can be put towards admin costs. A recruitment campaign is ongoing and has already started to bear fruit. However, membership feedback informs us unambiguously that the present £40 subscription (waged) is the highest the market will bear. We plan an expansion (ideally a doubling) of membership numbers but to do this we must continue to offer good value.
5. **Information services.** The need for a robust package of membership benefits dictates that, in the short term, the information we offer must be to members only. However,

these resources must demonstrate *exclusive* advantages and not be duplicated by standard industry websites such as BBC Writers Room and in the (free) e-bulletins of other organisations. For this reason it is crucial that we update and extend the Members Only area of our website in order to create a unique resource.

In the long term it would be desirable for Script Yorkshire to offer a range of open-access resources to the region's writers for performance and broadcast media -- but only if the external funding can be found to support this work.

6. **Progression Routes.** The study makes clear that the key to successful writer development work is providing progression routes by which an individual writer can move between script feedback, tailored workshops, script-in-hands and other low-budget, small-venue performances as required. For the very best this will lead to high-profile showcasing opportunities, one-to-one mentoring and ultimately a commission. There is a view amongst the trustees that the best way to achieve this, with the necessary degree of artistic judgement and quality control, is by appointing an artistic director to a full or near full-time post within the organisation.
7. **Brokering Relationships.** Both Ben Turner in his Routes To Sustainability project work and, independently, the Yorkshire Theatre Writers Network have identified a shortage of incubator spaces for new work. Yet the only theatre in the region currently resourced with a literary manager (the West Yorkshire Playhouse) is the one that effectively lacks a studio. Plenty of small spaces and small venues exist; the key delivery task for Script Yorkshire is to develop the relationships and broker the partnerships between the existing infrastructure and the new writing community. Our emerging branch structure, properly resourced, is a suitable vehicle for achieving this; strategic co-operation with the region's literary festivals is another.
8. **Script Submission.** There is a perceived need within the organisation for an overarching artistic director figure who can oversee the development of an integrated programme of quality writer development work. One point of access to this programme would be script submission. The artistic director would thus be at the head of an organisation with the capacity to read and feed back on scripts, freed from the necessity to tie in its writer development work to the specific needs of any one venue.

But without being part of an integrated programme of writer development and strategic partnerships for the delivery of new writing to audiences, a stand-alone 'script reading service' would be of limited value and would merely duplicate provision available from other sources e.g. Soho Writers' Centre and writernet.

9. **Mentoring.** Whilst using the existing model of integrated writer development as our template Script Yorkshire should not be afraid to deviate imaginatively from this. For example, we could explore the possibility of brokering mentoring relationships between writers on a paid-for basis in order to widen opportunities and generate additional income streams for experienced playwrights.
10. **Targeted provision** aimed at particular outreach groups would be an aspect of this integrated programme.
11. Most PN organisations engage in some kind of **international work**. The creation of international links and dialogue adds value for the region's writers; it is an attractive and desirable target for the longer term.

12. We do not need to address the issue of **publishing** until commissioned plays emerge; at which point it makes sense to publish the script as part of the programme.
13. Corporate sponsorship of **competitions, bursaries and prizes** only kicks in once a threshold level of activity has been reached to sustain a continuous fundraising operation. With a plethora of national competitions and prizes already available, the need for writers' bursaries seems particularly acute.
14. Dedicated office space is not an issue for Script Yorkshire at the moment but we need to be more explicit about the value of **in-kind support** being offered to us by BrownButler – and perhaps regularise this via an Arts & Business partnership.
15. Finally, we need to further **professionalize our board** which at present meets bi-monthly and still sometimes acts more like a management committee. Whilst retaining strong representation by practitioner members of the company (writers, directors, actors) we need to bring in more expertise from external partners such as Screen Yorkshire, the Big Six theatres, local authorities, university drama departments etc.

D. Next Steps

The role of Script Yorkshire is to encourage the development of dynamic new writing in the ACE Yorkshire region and to support the professional development of the region's script writers for theatre and broadcast media.

We aim to do this by delivering a region-wide, integrated programme of scriptwriter training and development, giving rise to genuine opportunities, which will both support existing practitioners and widen participation in employment within the writing for performance and broadcast industries. SY is committed to the necessary fundraising to make this happen.

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Script Yorkshire -- supporting new writing for performance and broadcast media in Yorkshire.

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