

# Thrive! poetry project:

## Evaluation of Planet Poetry and learning to date

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# 1 Introduction

Arts Council England's Gfta-Thrive! funding programme was launched as a pilot programme in 2007. Thrive! aims to develop the organisational performance of arts organisations and build their capacity to navigate 'a rapidly changing environment'. The central aspect of the Thrive! approach is using organisational development as a catalyst for wider sectoral development. Rather than prescribing a single model or approach, the programme is testing out in practice how this can be achieved. The projects being funded by Thrive! are therefore, on one level, exploratory by their very nature.

Planet Poetry was established by a consortium comprising the Poetry Society, Poetry Book Society, Poetry School and Apples and Snakes in response to the Thrive! funding opportunity. It was awarded funding with the aim of creating a framework for collaboration within the poetry sector, particularly between the founder organisations. Planet Poetry was initiated in 2007, aiming to conclude in 2009. In autumn 2008, it was decided to end Planet Poetry earlier than originally intended and to focus on capturing and evaluating the learning to date, in order to make different arrangements for investing the remaining funds for the benefit of the poetry sector.

Planet Poetry commissioned BOP Consulting to undertake an evaluation of the initiative over 2008 to 2010. BOP completed an Interim Review in autumn 2008. Following the decision to end Planet Poetry, BOP was tasked with completing the evaluation process by updating the Interim Review with any further insights gained from 'exit' interviews with all Planet Poetry staff and board members, and with consortium organisation directors. BOP was also asked to consult a wide range of figures within the poetry sector on the scope for collaborative organisational development within the poetry sector in future, with particular consideration of themes or types of activity that might be supported through the allocation of the remaining Thrive! funds not spent on Planet Poetry.

This report is a brief summary of BOP's evaluation process. It has been prepared for Arts Council England. The report presents:

- The vision, structure and activity of Planet Poetry
- Lessons for the poetry sector and Arts Council England resulting from Planet Poetry
- The process undertaken to design an alternative arrangement for spending the remaining Thrive! funds for the benefit of the poetry sector

## 2 The Planet Poetry initiative

### 2.1 Vision

The consortium organisations' vision for Planet Poetry, as articulated in their application to Thrive!, was to "increase the number, range and diversity of people who engage with poetry and to enable poetry to thrive and grow as a cultural force in this country."

This vision was suitably ambitious. It demonstrated the desire of the consortium organisations to challenge themselves, and it explicitly recognised (and proposed to aim to address) the challenges faced by the poetry sector in terms of modest infrastructure and low capacity. In keeping with Thrive! programme objectives, the vision envisaged an organisational step change that would maximise the efficiency with which the limited resources available to the poetry sector are applied, and would have a significant effect on how the sector benefits poets and their audiences.

Although Thrive! funding was awarded for a period of two years, the consortium organisations conceived Planet Poetry as a long term initiative that over ten years might:

- Research the perception of poetry to locate the barriers to engagement
- Create new ways of experiencing poetry and increase opportunities for poetry to be experienced by a larger sphere of the public
- Engage a future generation of writers, readers and audiences in poetry
- Develop the creative economy for poetry
- Improve the distribution and delivery of poetry, with particular focus on new technologies<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2 Structure

Planet Poetry was established as a Company Limited by Guarantee, with a Board and Director (who was also Company Secretary) that oversaw the activities of the project. A number of other support structures were also developed. Principal among these was the Project Facilitator role required for all Thrive! projects.

The structure of Planet Poetry was intended to work on the basis that the Director was accountable to the project Board, working with the Project Facilitator and the Directors of the consortium organisations (i.e. the organisations that founded Planet poetry).

The project team comprised the Project Director, the Operations Manager and the Administrator, all of which were salaried posts. The project team undertook the day-to-day running of the organisation, providing operational and executive functions for the process. The appointment of a strong, dedicated project team provided the potential to enable success. The team was actively involved in:

- Developing submissions to Arts Council England
- Supporting the development of options for the implementation phase
- Working with the Project Facilitator to develop a programme of organisational development activities for consortium organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> All aims are quoted from the Planet Poetry Thrive! funding application.

## 2.3 Testing and development phase

From May 2007 to January 2008, Planet Poetry was devoted to setting up necessary structures and processes, and to explore a number of options for project activity. The five options that were identified and tested during this phase were:

- Option 1: Advocacy
- Option 2: Organisational Development
- Option 3: Sponsorship and partnerships
- Option 4: On-line project
- Option 5: Research programme

Alongside the ongoing project planning process, a range of organisational development activities were also undertaken during the testing and development phases of Planet Poetry, including learning sets facilitated by the Project Facilitator, and cross-organisational workshops on education, marketing, and programming/editorial.

## 2.4 Implementation phase

The broad areas of activity proposed for the implementation phase were advocacy and awareness raising, and organisational development.

The advocacy and awareness raising activities were envisaged as a series of summits or symposia titled 'The Year of Thinking Provocatively'. The purpose of the events programme was to 'facilitate dialogues that build towards shared projects and new ideas, attracting larger and more diverse audiences and creating a dynamic future for poetry'.

The training and development activities outlined were to be focussed on developing the leadership and management capacity of participating poetry organisations. These activities would balance formal training with more informal activities (such as mentoring and shadowing). The leadership development strand would most likely involve courses on change management, performance management, board management, and strategy and business planning along with Clore Leadership Programme short courses. It would also involve learning sets, mentoring and shadowing activities. The management strand would involve a mixture of informal development activities, seminars on communications, fundraising, and marketing and courses on a range of skills areas ranging from project management to digital publishing.

However in autumn 2008, Planet Poetry's board, project team and Project Facilitator – along with the directors of the consortium organisations and Arts Council England – concluded that while collaborative organisational development in the poetry sector was well worth exploring and Planet Poetry had successfully focused thinking on the priority themes for this, the Planet Poetry structure was not best constituted to take this forwards into the implementation phase.

### 3 Lessons learned

Planet Poetry's vision was dependent on achieving a strong collaborative relationship between the four consortium organisations and all parts of the Planet Poetry structure. This proved too ambitious in the proposed timescale, despite the energy and goodwill invested. The consortium organisations did not develop a strong enough relationship, and the Planet Poetry project team did not develop the authority to drive the change agenda at a strategic level or within the operations of the consortium organisations.

With hindsight, the speed with which the Thrive! funding application had to be submitted was a contributory factor. It did not allow enough time for the consortium organisations to clarify their respective objectives and to build a sufficiently robust vision and structure for Planet Poetry. It also did not allow other poetry organisations that might have been compatible with the project – because they are already involved in collaborative working or because they are operating at the leading edge of the sector – to come on board.

Once the project had started, the consortium organisations and the Planet Poetry project team took some time to get to grips with operating within the Thrive! programme. This meant that concerns over Planet Poetry's structure and the relationships between the consortium organisations were not identified or addressed quickly enough.

The difficulties experienced by Planet Poetry to a certain extent reflect the challenge that Planet Poetry recognised at the outset and aimed to address: the poetry sector has low capacity to deliver innovation and improvement due to the small size and inadequate resources of organisations; and the (typically but not universally) low levels of cohesion and connection between organisations. The experience of Planet Poetry therefore underlines the challenge to funders of how to best support the poetry sector over the long term. In particular it suggests that future initiatives aiming to deliver collaborative sectoral development (including the next stage of the Thrive! project) should:

- Invest in partnerships that are existing, elective and driven by intrinsic motives, i.e. not imposed from above or formed in response to a funding opportunity
- Deliver activities rather than attempting to generate ideas and possibilities (particularly where there might be issues around leadership and strategic capacity)
- Be clear on objectives
- Build the confidence of individual partners and build trust between partners
- Be clear on roles and responsibilities
- Identify potential sources of conflict and manage conflicts
- Recognise where capacity may need to be developed to realise project objectives or expectations

In conclusion, Planet Poetry has highlighted and helped to clarify some of the key challenges that the poetry sector faces, and has suggested some useful pointers for moving the sector forwards.

## 4 Next phase of Thrive! poetry project

The Planet Poetry project team and Project Facilitator alerted Arts Council England quickly when it became clear that the project was not operating effectively enough to successfully move to implementation. The Planet Poetry Board and Arts Council England subsequently acted decisively, with the result that a substantial amount of Thrive! funds originally awarded to Planet Poetry is protected.

BOP's consultation with a wide range of voices within the poetry sector confirmed that:

- There is enthusiasm for designing an alternative arrangement for spending the remaining Thrive! funds for the benefit of the poetry sector
- The priority themes for sectoral development identified by Planet Poetry around advocacy, organisational development, sponsorship and partnerships, digital and online media, and research are correct and still relevant

BOP's consultation with the poetry sector uncovered a wealth of individual ideas in response to the priority themes identified by Planet Poetry. These ideas encompass both the short term (i.e. activities which might take place during the likely period for spend of remaining Thrive! funds) and long term (i.e. activities aiming to bring about genuine sectoral change and improvement).

In response to this, Arts Council England is developing a structure for spending the remaining Thrive! funds, with advice from BOP and in consultation with key figures and organisations within the poetry sector and its partner sectors.