

National Poetry Day
A review of its reach, impact, sustainability and reputation

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Contents

1. Introduction	3
1.1 About National Poetry Day	3
1.2 Report overview and methodology	3
1.3 National Poetry Day as it stands	4
2. Reach: A <i>National Poetry Day</i>	6
2.1 Regional Writing Development Agencies	6
2.2 London and beyond	6
2.3 Northern Ireland, Scotland & Wales	7
2.4 Poets, poets, everywhere	8
3. Impact: Consolidation	9
3.1 Communication	9
3.2 Schools and libraries	9
3.3 A brief	10
3.4 The role of Forward Arts Foundation	11
3.5 The role of partners	12
3.6 Steering group meetings	13
3.7 Press	14
3.8 Sharing successes	15
4. Impact: Moving Forward	16
4.1 Next steps	16
4.2 Schools and libraries	16
4.3 Publishers	17
4.4 Research and case studies	17
4.5 Partnership	17
4.6 Commissioning	18
5. Sustainability	19
5.1 Developing new programmes	19
5.2 Measuring effectiveness	19
5.3 Forward Arts Foundation	20
6. Reputation	21
7. Recommendations	22
7.1 Communications	22
7.2 Press	22
7.3 Structure	23

7.4 Strategy	24
7.5 Opportunities for further investigation	24
7.6 In summary	25
8. Thanks	26
9. Appendix: Discussion Guides	27

1. Introduction

1.1 About National Poetry Day

National Poetry Day was founded in 1994 and aims, on the first Thursday of every October, to engage people across the country with reading, writing, performing and listening to poetry. It has a particular focus on reaching those who would not normally engage with the art form, and on celebrating the wealth and breadth of poetry in the UK.

From 1999 onwards, each National Poetry Day has been given a theme as a starting point for the year's activity. The 2016 theme was 'messages' and the theme for 2017 will be 'freedom'.

In 2007 Forward Arts Foundation took over responsibility for delivering National Poetry Day. Alongside National Poetry Day, Forward Arts Foundation stages the Forward Prizes for Poetry and produces the annual Forward Books of Poetry.

In coordinating the day, Forward Arts Foundation works closely with leading poetry, literacy and literature organisations across the UK, convening quarterly steering group meetings. It works with partners to develop a free resource pack for schools, disperses information about nationwide activity, and runs online campaigns for digital engagement. In addition, Forward Arts Foundation hosts an online events listing and engages a PR agency to maximise press and media coverage on the day and during the build-up to it.

Activity on National Poetry Day is then delivered by members of the steering group, as well as regional literature organisations, individual poets, and keen poetry enthusiasts across the country.

"We bring together leading poetry, literacy and literary organisations around a shared purpose: promoting the enjoyment, discovery and sharing of poetry."
Forward Arts Foundation

1.2 Report overview and methodology

The aim of this report is to look at how the Forward Arts Foundation delivers National Poetry Day; exploring particularly its reach, impact, sustainability and reputation.

As National Poetry Day relies upon a great deal of work with partners, this report began with a telephone consultation across 16 organisations. These included national and regional literature and literacy bodies as well as organisations delivering engagement programmes of a similar nature. Amongst these groups were a range of experiences from some who have played a key role in delivering National Poetry Day; to those who have had limited or no engagement with National Poetry Day until this point.

The organisations surveyed were:

- Apples & Snakes
- Arts Council Northern Ireland
- BBC
- Centre for Literacy in Primary Education
- Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals
- First Story
- Literature Wales
- Macmillan Children's Books
- New Writing North
- Poet in the City
- The Poetry Archive
- The Scottish Poetry Library
- Writers Centre Norwich
- Writing East Midlands
- Writing West Midlands
- World Book Day

Unfortunately consultations with The Poetry Society and the Reading Agency's Summer Reading Challenge team were unable to take place.

Using feedback from these partners this report aims to evaluate the current structures in place for delivering National Poetry Day, and provide recommendations for improvement. It also assesses the role that Forward Arts Foundation fills within the sector, and how in planning its organisational strategy for the coming years, it may be of most use to the poetry community.

All quotations in this report are taken from the telephone consultations.

1.3 National Poetry Day as it stands

The first thing to note about feedback from the organisations consulted was that there are generally good attitudes to both National Poetry Day and Forward Arts Foundation's stewardship of it in recent years.

Forward Arts Foundation has brought in major corporate partners in the BBC and Waitrose; has coordinated a national and international media campaign; and pulled a large number of national literature and literacy organisations together to produce a joint teaching resource. These elements were all identified by surveyed organisations as National Poetry Day's key strengths.

In addition, the majority of organisations interviewed also suggested, unprompted, that they felt interest in National Poetry Day has increased and that the day has become larger and more visible. As one partner put it: "*it's become more successful, and that success generates interest*".

Whilst Forward Arts Foundation has coordinated the national campaign, partner organisations have delivered events and programmes on the day. These range from readings, awards ceremonies, commissions and more. While some work is developed from scratch, a number of organisations schedule existing programmes to take place on National Poetry Day. Many partners noted that producing something for National Poetry Day was now

a regular part of their programme, and in one instance was the only regular part of an organisation's programme.

Having achieved success over the past few years, and brought together a large number of partners to work together it seems an opportune moment to reflect on the position of National Poetry Day. There seems to be a model in place which works, and which has delivered results, but is it the best model for engaging all parties in National Poetry Day activity?

2. Reach: A *National Poetry Day*

2.1 Regional Writing Development Agencies

In speaking to a large number of literature and literacy organisations from across the UK, it was telling that some were regular members of the National Poetry Day steering group and some were not. The group seems to involve a few smaller partners and a number of London-focussed organisations, whereas some regional writing development agencies felt quite disconnected. (For a discussion of the steering group meeting structure see 3.6 below.)

In one instance this was viewed as a positive, with a partner commenting that it was inclusive and seemed that partners “*opt-in*”. Anyone could take part, and once there “*everyone’s voice was heard*”. However one regional writing development agency said that they had had to find out information about the day from the Forward Arts Foundation website, rather than being contacted directly.

Interestingly, even those organisations who felt somewhat cut off from planning at a national level, still marked the day and expressed a desire to be more fully involved. One stated:

“If there was something we could be of use with then we’d like to help and tie in, but perhaps it’s that we’re not approached very often”.

Another regional writing development agency mentioned that National Poetry Day had moved lower down their priorities at least partly because of its success. Local schools and libraries marked the day unprompted, and therefore the agency felt the day didn’t need their support. As there has been no clear ask from Forward Arts Foundation about what it required partners to do, this view had continued.

Whilst it’s clear that Forward Arts Foundation has limited time and resources and must prioritise higher-level corporate partnership generation with organisations like the BBC, it’s important that lines of communication with key national literature organisations are not overlooked. Here are willing organisations, with engaged audiences, who could easily participate more fully in the programme. One partner mentioned that what was required was just “*a conversation about what we might do*”. While another stated:

“All we need is something that says: ‘this is the theme; these are the campaign materials; here’s the marketing copy and images.’”

Engaging these regional partners is surely a quick-win, that can be readily addressed with an improved communication strategy, as discussed in 3.1 below.

2.2 London and beyond

It was mentioned by a large number of non-London partners that the programme at times seemed quite London-centric. It was generally acknowledged that this was understandable given that the main literature organisations and the press tend have their bases in the capital. Partners also noted that Forward Arts Foundation had done work to counter this, for

example in working to generate regional news. However, it was felt that more could be done in order for Forward Arts Foundation to be seen to be promoting activity in the regions.

The focus on activity in Hull as the UK City of Culture in 2017 was warmly welcomed by regional partners. One suggested that, if a success, perhaps there could be a different regional focus each year, stating:

"For many of us that would feel like a really nice thing to happen; it would be symbolic... [and] it would challenge that region to respond... we'd feel like we'd have to up our game."

Whether this focus, without the support of an existing City of Culture programme or the BBC, is feasible is one that will need answering. However a public gesture of acknowledging work outside the capital does seem like something that many regional partners would welcome, and would be worth bearing in mind for future years.

2.3 Northern Ireland, Scotland & Wales

Discussions with partners outside of England again emphasised that they each had different challenges and opportunities in working on National Poetry Day.

In Wales especially, translation is an issue and requires additional time to be built into the production of any resources or printed materials. In some years the National Poetry Day brand collateral had been translated into Welsh, but not in other years. Ideally factoring translation into any design and print costing and timings should become the norm in future years.

Both Scottish and Welsh partners emphasised that press releases needed to be tailored to their region, as local press were more likely to pick up on Scottish or Welsh stories, rather than UK-wide stories. To one partner this was a definite positive, a "*comfort blanket*", as they knew national press would pick up on their stories. However, these organisations all stated that they felt that they could do more to help Forward Arts Foundation generate media interest in their area. They have good press contacts in their regions and felt they would be able to follow up with local contacts if they were more involved in the process.

Northern Ireland presents a particular challenge, as the Irish national poetry body Poetry Ireland hold Poetry Day Ireland every April. This means it is hard to present a clear message to the press as different schools north of the border celebrate different national poetry days. There is definitely a conversation to be had with Poetry Ireland to discuss this clash and see if there might be a solution, as it must surely present the same problems to them.

It was also clear that, though in its infancy, the Seamus Heaney Centre at HomePlace could be a key strategic partner, as "*people will do things for [Seamus Heaney] that they won't do for anyone else*". Northern Ireland has long been viewed as a bit of a cold spot for National Poetry Day activity, so this opportunity could be a good step to addressing that.

2.4 Poets, poets, everywhere

In discussion with partners, there was a great degree of agreement about the aims of National Poetry Day. Visibility, public awareness and reaching new audiences were key themes that came up repeatedly. One partner neatly summed it up:

"It's a mass celebration of poetry, and the 'mass' is important, and the 'celebration' is important"

Interestingly, there was also a particular emphasis on contemporary poetry and (with both partners inside and outside of the capital) on the idea that there are poets everywhere, working across the length and breadth of the UK. When asked about the aim of National Poetry Day, partners responded:

"Showing people [poetry is] all around them."

"Spotlighting the fact that there are poets everywhere, really good poets everywhere."

"[Demonstrating] that poems are not miraculous things, they come from ordinary people."

This idea of poets being everywhere could be a simple and effective way of focussing on these two ideas of the wealth of contemporary poetry, and the spread of poets across the UK. Given the striking prevalence with which this came up during the consultation, and the desire to use National Poetry Day to reach all parts of the country, it might be worth considering this theme as a focus in future campaigns.

Impact

3. Impact: Consolidation

In assessing how to maximise the impact of National Poetry Day, there seemed to be two key areas of consideration. The first is tweaking the original model to consolidate the progress already made by Forward Arts Foundation. The second (explored in section 4) begins to ask ‘where next?’ and looks at future plans for National Poetry Day.

3.1 Communication

Communication was the one area in which there was often room for improvement, as discussed in 2.1 above with regard to regional partners. It was also the area that came up most strongly when speaking to organisations who delivered similar mass-engagement programmes within the literature sector.

One organisation stated that in delivering their campaign:

“I’m constantly telling people what we’re doing, or what we want them to do.”

“I tell them what I’m going to do, what I’m doing, what I’ve done, and then try to make that as exciting as possible.”

It seems that this is a strategy Forward Arts Foundation could adopt. A number of organisations stated that they simply needed prompting to think about activity in good time; even if that’s just a reminder to nudge their partner schools about booking an in-school workshop.

“We are up for [taking part], but the line of communication isn’t perhaps there, so it’s not at the front of our mind when we’re planning our projects... we need to be prompted.”

One National Poetry Day media partner also spoke about the importance of receiving information in good time so that they can factor it into their planning.

“What we need are clear summaries of what’s going on what the thinking is.”

It’s worth noting additionally that this requires not only good communication from Forward Arts Foundation about themes and messages, but from the partners about their events and programmes. A stronger communications strategy all-round would help the flow of information between all parties.

3.2 Schools and libraries

This idea of timely reminders and prompts for action was something that Forward Arts Foundation is aware of, stating that:

"It's clear that schools and libraries would welcome [an offer] which reaches them much much earlier in the year."

The introduction of badges and stickers in recent years were warmly welcomed by many partners who commented that physical things to give out were of real benefit, especially when working with schools and libraries. Some of these partners particularly mentioned that they would be able to make more use of these if they received them earlier in the year, so that they could then distribute them more widely.

Cost was acknowledged as a barrier for producing and distributing such materials, but they were praised by a number of partners as a simple way of spreading the message.

3.3 A brief

A number of partners asked for Forward Arts Foundation to provide them each year with a simple message, or call to action for the campaign. With a clear and timely communication partners felt that they, in turn, could pass this onto their networks and engage them more thoroughly.

"We should be being used more to galvanise people, but we need the tools to do that... For me that's the big way of making the most of all those different partners... It's such an easy win."

When this was discussed, many partners were after a toolkit, or "*simple messaging document*", although the requirements for this varied slightly.

Some were looking for a document for their organisation stating clearly that year's messages for National Poetry Day, providing examples of poems on that year's theme, and perhaps offering some provocations to allow them to tackle some of the less obviously inspiring themes.

Other partners however wanted an external document to send to their various stakeholders with a clear way of passing on the National Poetry Day message and getting involved. One partner in particular gave the example of their trustees, who were keen to support the organisation's involvement in National Poetry Day, but weren't sure how. It was suggested that a simple document with that year's key messages would be helpful, along with a call to action. This could be for digital activity, or could involve small steps like putting a poem up in your workplace entrance, which would help raise awareness.

Feedback from the Poetry Ambassadors was also that they would benefit from a briefing document which outlined their role, and detailed where they could direct schools who wished to take part.

The feedback above suggests that perhaps more than one briefing document is required to satisfy the needs of different audiences, but the key theme is that partners would like a clear and consistent message about that year's campaign, and a clear call to action.

3.4 The role of Forward Arts Foundation

As mentioned earlier in this report (see 1.3), Forward Arts Foundation received much praise for its recent stewardship of National Poetry Day, not least for its role in bringing together many disparate and independent organisations around a common theme.

When speaking of the role they felt Forward Arts Foundation should take, many organisations spoke of "*galvanizing*" people, "*bringing lots of scattered things together*". Importantly however one theme was picked up by several partners: that of having "*the will to do it*", and "*generating excitement and enthusiasm*" for it. As one organisation said:

"[You] need to work out how you put a firework up everyone's bottom to get them excited... If the organiser is not the enthuser then who is going to be?... [You've] got to be utterly passionate about it and to be at the forefront of telling people about it."

Whatever reservations there may have been in the past about bringing the poetry sector together, many of the organisations now expected Forward Arts Foundation to be taking a lead on some things and stated:

"[Everything] can't be decided by committee."

"Deciding the theme by committee doesn't work. You just need to put it out there, and if people don't like it they can register their disapproval."

In this was a desire from partners for Forward Arts Foundation to communicate a longer-term strategy for the direction of National Poetry Day and free itself from thinking October-to-October. There was a feeling that the partners could feed into this, but that they in turn needed Forward Arts Foundation to lead on this so that they could follow. With a longer-term strategy in place partners could factor this into their own plans, and begin to develop collaborative programmes.

Producing a strategy like this will increase the impact that National Poetry Day can have, by increasing the ability of the partners to work together. The most frequent barrier to engagement mentioned by partners was time pressures, and capacity within their organisation. By offering longer-term plans, there is the opportunity for a greater involvement with partners for National Poetry Day. One organisation delivering a similar literature participation programme summed this up neatly:

"Someone somewhere needs to have a vision for what it wants to be... You have to have a vision and remain true to that... And then tell everyone your vision, repeatedly."

For a further discussion of this vision and strategy, see section 4 below.

3.5 The role of partners

Along with defining Forward Arts Foundation's role, comes the task of defining the role of the partner organisations.

As described in 1.3 above, the activity delivered on the day varies from partner to partner, with some commissioning events and programmes, some hosting existing programmes on the day, and some promoting the National Poetry Day message and the work of other partners. Cross-promotion of activity was seen as a real positive from involvement in National Poetry Day. As one partner summed it up:

"It's about being generous in our celebration of poetry on that day."

Although there was a general consensus about what was involved, some organisations expressed a desire for some form of partnership outline which defined their role, even in broad terms, and with the capacity for exceptions. One partner queried what the partnership meant, stating that they didn't deliver activity on the day, and:

"We'd promote it even if we weren't a partner."

Such an outline has been used for the early development of National Writing Day, and a couple of partners mentioned that this has been very beneficial in knowing what was required of them:

"For our own thought process that's been really helpful to know what a partnership means."

Such a document might be beneficial for National Poetry Day, tied with a possible restructure of the steering group, and the levels of involvement of different partners (*as outlined in 3.6 below*). *It doesn't seem as if a vast change in what is asked of partners is required, but it would be good to have this outlined.*

Additional emphasis in this partnership outline should be on sharing a consistent message for the day, in line with an improved communication strategy discussed in 3.1-3.3 above. One partner defined this aspect of the relationship with Forward Arts Foundation neatly, with an analogy to Children in Need. There's an overarching national campaign with set messages, and then all of the partners do their bit to contribute towards that. For National Poetry Day, they said, that means:

"We accept and contribute to the thematic approach. We agree to values and vision. We buy into the big banner headline, and then we do something we think is effective and which steers in that general direction."

A sentiment like this, added to the specifics of delivery, would be a good starting point for a partnership outline.

3.6 Steering group meetings

To date, a key part of being a National Poetry Day partner has been attendance at meetings of the national steering group.

Feeling about these meetings was ambivalent amongst almost all partners. The meetings were praised for driving planning, as tasks were completed for the next meeting; for allowing “everyone’s voice [to be] heard”; and for being a “natural meeting point for [the sector]”. Many partners noted that another such opportunity to bring everyone together doesn’t exist and that:

“There’s a bit of weight behind National Poetry Day as a focus... I think if [our organisation] just tried to bring everyone together, I’m not sure who’d turn up!”

However, at the same time, it was felt that steering group meetings were often “tedious”, and that a lot of time was spent updating on activity which was of limited relevance to other partners, especially as many events and programmes are now regular staples of National Poetry Day and don’t change from year to year.

Additionally, as discussed in 2.1 earlier, which organisations were chosen to sit on the steering group appeared somewhat haphazard and in recent years it seemed that numbers had steadily increased. This presented both a great opportunity to have a truly sector-wide discussion, but also added to the length of organisational updates.

To this end it seems there is a need for perhaps two key alterations to this model. The first is for a reduction in the size of the steering group to just those key national organisations integral to National Poetry Day’s success. This may vary year-on-year to include, for example, the BBC if they are a core partner for one year, but should have a stable core group. In order not to lose the involvement of other partners, this must be tied to a better communications strategy involving all national partners and providing timely updates and prompts. If programmes and initiatives develop from this that require further attention, it may be worth considering establishing specific working groups to develop those ideas.

Additionally I would suggest an annual (or at most bi-annual) meeting for all interested parties which truly can be a sector-wide gathering. Organisational updates should, if possible, be shared elsewhere and the meeting used mainly for longer-term planning or strategy implementation. If possible time should be allowed after the meeting (either formally or informally) for networking, as this was often cited as a key facet of steering group meetings. If funding is available this may take the form of a symposium, although as one partner noted, this must have value to partners in and of itself.

Whilst earlier discussions (see 3.4) suggest a need for Forward Arts Foundation to take a lead in directing strategy it's worth noting that all partners still felt the need to retain a steering group to assist in setting the direction of National Poetry Day. One organisation delivering similar participation programmes stressed the need for such a group.

[Members of the sector] are the people to have that debate”

They stated that this sounding board gives the lead partner the chance to gauge opinion in the sector and keeps the programme as one that is run by the sector, for the sector.

3.7 Press

Press and media coverage was often cited as the main benefit that Forward Arts Foundation could bring to National Poetry Day, which partners could not do themselves.

“What I envy is their access to national media.”

“[National Poetry Day] brings the potential to access media in a way that we don’t normally do.”

However, there was a feeling amongst some organisations that though everyone benefitted from the raised profile of poetry on that day, in coverage of specific events and projects the National Poetry Day brand can at times “*usurp*” the partners’. This was, at times, compounded by the press contacting poets directly rather than the organisation coordinating that particular piece of activity, cutting them out of the process completely. As one partner pointed out, this is a missed opportunity to develop relationships between the press and poetry organisations, and to introduce the press and public to partner organisations who offer year-round poetry programmes for them to engage with.

All those who commented on the issue above, were aware that despite all best intentions these details were the ones that the press, deliberately or not, is always likely to exclude. However, there was a desire for Forward Arts Foundation, as the coordinating body, to be seen to be addressing this if possible.

An additional way of addressing these poetry-press relations was offered by a partner who suggested that there might be a chance for Forward Arts Foundation, after National Poetry Day, to facilitate introductions between specific journalists and the poetry organisations they had covered, or expressed an interest in covering. This would give the chance for poetry organisations to follow up on these conversations and try and establish sustainable relationships with those media outlets. This may prove unworkable given the scale of press coverage, but might be an idea for Forward Arts Foundation to explore.

Tied to concerns about the London-centric focus discussed in 2.2 earlier, some regional partners felt that although the press attention garnered nationally was good, they would like this to filter down to the regions. The 2016 PR breakdown however, states that in terms of

regional coverage London had the lowest reach (for the second year running) and was 8th out of 10 regions in terms of media coverage value. In the key media highlights pulled out in the PR report, one involved a poet from London, whereas others involved poets from the East, the North West, and the Prince of Wales reading the work of a (Northern) Irish poet.

It seems that there was a lack of awareness of this regional spread, and perhaps more might be made of it. Additionally, when discussing this data, one partner suddenly realised that they might be able to use it in funding bids or advocacy work for their organisation; something they'd never considered.

3.8 Sharing successes

These successes, such as the PR reach etc., are shared with partners, but could be shouted about more loudly. Specific examples of sector-collaboration or press mentions, and their benefits to partners, could be highlighted more clearly. One of the organisations delivering similar programmes stressed the importance of celebration. They said it was key part of their programme, alongside delivery, and that sometimes they have whole meetings just reporting on the successes and the numbers they had reached.

With the first steering group meeting of the October-to-October cycle taking place in the New Year, attention already begins to turn to the upcoming National Poetry Day. It seems an opportunity is missed to properly celebrate the day's success with partners and wider networks. The PR report findings are impressive, but buried in an attachment to a business email, rather than shouted about in an attractive mailing. Perhaps a change of strategy on this front is worth considering.

4. Impact: Moving Forward

4.1 Next steps

As stated above, National Poetry Day was overwhelmingly felt to be a success and there was a strong amount of goodwill felt towards it. Involvement was seen in a positive light and the day was seen to have a collective strength.

"It's useful to connect with national conversations in order to punch above our weight."

Were it to continue, the areas for slight improvement mentioned in this report notwithstanding, it would most likely continue to grow its reach at a steady rate. However, as discussed in 3.4 above, there was a feeling that Forward Arts Foundation is at a point to set out a strategy for the coming years and perhaps push in new directions. As one partner stated, the ongoing activity is a success, and the question now is:

"What do they add each year that's the additional exciting elements that will attract the media or change people's perceptions?"

In looking at this question it's important to make sure it meets a need within the sector and that any developments are sustainable.

The main benefits felt by partners were in the high-level partnerships that Forward Arts Foundation was able to broker, and the nationwide press coverage that it was able to generate. It was felt that this is where Forward Arts Foundation's focus should remain, as this is what had helped develop the day's visibility and reputation.

"[to get coverage] needs key conversations with key people"

"I definitely feel like it's grown in the last few years. Previously it would have just been a mention in our newsletter."

Interestingly, when asked about barriers to engagement, or if there was any way that Forward Arts Foundation could improve its relations with partners, the subject of funding (which one might suspect to be the main hurdle) was rarely, if ever, mentioned. Most partners were aware this this was either an unrealistic demand, or an unsustainable offer.

4.2 Schools and libraries

The communications recommendations discussed in 3.1-3.3 above: i.e. of having a clear and timely message and call to action, would certainly help give a focus to National Poetry Day work in schools. Organisations delivering similar large literature engagement programmes stressed that sending physical mailings to schools and libraries was the most effective way to engage them and had a far greater impact than electronic mailings. This would seem to also be reflected in the success of the National Poetry Day freebies (stickers, badges etc) which many of the partners commented favourably on.

Were significant funding available, Forward Arts Foundation may do well to consider such a mass mailing. Based on the success of the teaching resource and the freebies, a schools' pack to go out to each school with freebies and instructions on how to take part, much like Children in Need or Red Nose Day supporter packs, would no doubt significantly increase participation.

Work with libraries for National Poetry Day to date has not been achieved on a mass scale. Unfortunately a conversation with the Reading Agency, who conduct a great deal of work with libraries, had to be postponed at the last minute due to unforeseen circumstances and so they have not yet been able to feed into this conversation. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) however provided much valuable information to this consultation and provide a great deal of help on their website for contacting their membership and various library committees. Both these organisations would be worth following up with to discuss potential partnership work to reach wider networks of libraries.

Discussions on work with libraries with all contacted organisations spoke of the need for a long lead-in, timely communication and, where possible, physical mailings to libraries.

4.3 Publishers

Another larger step mentioned was whether National Poetry Day could echo the success of the World Book Day £1 book tokens and books. This has come about with the involvement of a number of publishers which has enabled funding to support such a scheme. With poetry publishers like Macmillan Children's Books already a partner on National Poetry Day, it would be worth Forward Arts Foundation making a move to engage poetry publishers further in National Poetry Day and seeing what might be possible.

4.4 Research and case studies

Partners suggested several possible ways in which Forward Arts Foundation might develop its strategy. The first was to provide the perennial holy grail of arts funding: the evidence of impact. A number of partners spoke about the possibility of Forward Arts Foundation commissioning a research document which would speak to the impact of poetry on education attainment, wellbeing or other measures; potentially gathering data from across the sector. Others spoke of a more media-focussed initiative of having poets work with, say, refugees, or other groups and presenting this as a case study of the importance of poetry engagement.

These may be avenues for Forwards Arts Foundation to explore, and would possibly aid the sustainability of the sector as a whole, as discussed in section 5 below.

4.5 Partnership

Another possibility presented was that Forward Arts Foundation was an ideal partner for many projects. Linking to the idea of regional partners being able to "*punch above [their]*

weight" with a national body, several of the organisations discussed the desire to partner with Forward Arts Foundation to develop projects that shared ties to National Poetry Day.

For Forward Arts Foundation to share a strategic role in poetry programmes taking place across the sector - whether in producing collaborative bids, or simply being a named partner - would assist the dovetailing of National Poetry Day with existing activity, rather than duplicating provision.

This ties neatly with Forward Arts Foundation assessing how it uses steering group and other meetings to bring together so many partners. It would not be a stretch of this role for Forward Arts Foundation to assist in being the catalyst and broker for some collaboration within the sector, or assisting on approaches to funders. That said, there is also a responsibility here for National Poetry Day partners to be pro-active and see this opportunity to approach Forward Arts Foundation with ideas and proposals. Perhaps this hesitation has been due to the necessity of Forward Arts Foundation's outward-looking perspective, seeking new corporate partnerships, as discussed in section 5 below.

4.6 Commissioning

Finally, a number of partners discussed whether Forward Arts Foundation should take a greater role in the commissioning of new works for National Poetry Day. Were funding to be found for this, commissioning new work would have the benefit of not only providing new content for press coverage, but would also engage Forward Arts Foundation in the artform more actively. Some comments by partners reflected that they felt, with the large PR campaign that sometimes "*[it] doesn't always feel like the poet is at the centre of this*", and that the voice of the poet was lost.

It's worth noting however that commissioning of new work would alter Forward Arts Foundation's role. Up until now it has worked as a convenor and facilitator, rather than undertaking much work as an active commissioning agent. Such risk is discussed further in section 6 below.

5. Sustainability

One key concern for Forward Arts Foundation is, naturally, the sustainability of National Poetry Day. As discussed in 3.7 above, some partners noted that establishing links between the press and individual organisations was something that would facilitate sustainable relationships, which could continue outside the annual focus of National Poetry Day.

There was a similar feeling regarding audience development. Although all partners hoped to develop long-term audiences, many partners felt that the one-day focus was something that was vital to maintain, not least in generating press interest. As one partner put it:

“If it’s year-round then it’s not National Poetry Day, it’s the Poetry Awareness Project.”

Instead, almost all partners spoke of a desire for National Poetry Day, where possible, to feed into the existing programmes that they deliver across the country.

5.1 Developing new programmes

It was notable that only a few organisations suggested the delivery of additional programmes by Forward Arts Foundation. These tended to be smaller organisations with a specific remit, where new activity represented opportunities to develop into new areas and did not encroach on their current programme. For other organisations the possibility of duplicating existing provision was more of a concern. It was felt here that Forward Arts Foundation’s signposting role towards existing activity was more important.

Research and case studies were one area where a specific need was raised. It was felt that any work carried out would help develop the sustainability of the sector as it would both provide information to support funding bids and/or would also raise public awareness of the benefits of engagement with poetry.

Alternatively partnership work would avoid any duplication of activity. This would enable Forward Arts Foundation to add to the range of activity connected to and taking place on National Poetry Day, as well as fulfil a role in supporting the sector. It would be able to use the influence it has developed over recent years to bring funding and corporate partnerships to the sector, helping organisations expand their work rather than duplicating provision.

5.2 Measuring effectiveness

Whilst not the main focus of this report, the financial sustainability of National Poetry Day is something that is worth considering. As a National Portfolio Organisation, Forward Arts Foundation has a degree of security within Arts Council England’s three to four year funding cycles.

Additional funding from corporate partners or trusts and foundations will to some extent rest upon an ability to demonstrate impact or a measurable difference on participants. This is

something on which there has been an even stronger focus in recent years, especially in the education sector. Whilst Forward Arts Foundation has lots of measurable outcomes for press coverage, social media reach and web traffic, it would be hard to gather such figures for educational work. By working through partner organisations it is operating at one or two levels removed in most instances.

As discussed in 5.1 above, to establish additional programmes in order to directly reach young people was something that was felt had a high likelihood of duplicating activity.

Instead, Forward Arts Foundation might have two options to pursue in requests for support. One might be to focus on its national reach, seeking support for a direct mailing to every school and library in the country, and gathering representative participation data through its call to action. Alternatively, through developing a research programme, as outlined in 4.4, Forward Arts Foundation might be able to demonstrate the benefits of access to poetry, and then make a case for widening access to poetry across the UK.

5.3 Forward Arts Foundation

It was frequently noted that Forward Arts Foundation achieves an outstanding amount for such a small team. In particular the enthusiasm and determination of the Director was praised in “[bringing] energy to National Poetry Day, and - importantly - success”. However there were some concerns that, as a result of being so small an organisation, a lot rested on a few people. One partner wondered if the Director was, for whatever reason, suddenly not there would the day be able to continue with the same impetus?

The drive of Forward Arts Foundation has enabled National Poetry Day to reach the strong position it currently holds. However to ensure the best possible success, it might require someone to take a more day-to-day role to consolidate this position and implement regular systems. This in turn would allow the Director to focus on reaching new corporate partners, and developing strategic partnerships, which is what the partners have found as a key benefit to the day.

Some of the issues outlined above regarding communication within the poetry sector may perhaps be a result of the fact that as Forward Arts Foundation, understandably, focussed attention on bringing in corporate partners and media attention. Therefore there was not a sector-focussed contact at the organisation keeping up relationships with the regional writing development agencies at a delivery level, for example.

If Forward Arts Foundation chooses to develop partnership work within the sector it may well benefit from a role geared towards being more inward-looking, as the Director then fulfils an outward-looking role.

6. Reputation

National Poetry Day, from the opinion of the partners and the press coverage attained on National Poetry Day 2016 seems to be in rude health. As discussed above "*there is goodwill out there*" towards Forward Arts Foundation from members of the sector. Recommendations from partners that in steering National Poetry Day, Forward Arts Foundation takes a stronger lead certainly show that there is a feeling of trust. Having brought a large part of the sector together, making decisions by committee is now seen as a hindrance rather than a virtue.

In planning a strategy for the coming years Forward Arts Foundation should not be afraid of taking the initiative. That said, as many poetry veterans will know, in a small sector there is the possibility for conflict and Forward Arts Foundation needs to make sure that it bring everyone with it.

I think therefore it is worth sounding a slight note of caution that Forward Arts Foundation needs to set the agenda here, but should not only prioritise the sector as a whole, but be clear and open in its reasoning. There is a need not only to be fair, but also to be seen to be fair.

This is especially true should Forward Arts Foundation begin commissioning new work, or new programmes. If it decides to move in this direction then there should be an awareness that its role will change somewhat from a convenor and facilitator, to an agent making choices about which organisations or poets are chosen for certain roles or projects. Again, there just needs to be an awareness on being seen to be non-partisan.

The only other reputational risk worth a small mention is that of possible complaints about individual events marketed under the National Poetry Day banner. A quality control would however be unfeasible, especially if the aim is to publicise as much poetry activity as possible. Forward Arts Foundation is in a good position that with a strong group of partners delivering quality events all those publicised at a high level are invariably of excellent quality.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Communications

- Develop and implement a comprehensive communications strategy. Where possible this should include the following.
 - An awareness of the need for long lead-in time.
 - A focus on contact with, and engagement of, regional partners including all regional writing development agencies.
 - Clarity of message.
 - Clarity of ask.
 - A shared document containing key messages and call to action (and possibly including poems and provocations) for partners to use to reach their networks.
 - A loud celebration of successes.
- Consider a focus on “*poets everywhere*” to highlight the contemporaneity and geographical reach of poetry in the UK.
- If possible, offer physical materials (badges, stickers and posters), factoring in:
 - Time for translation into Welsh.
 - Time for these to reach partners and be distributed to their networks.

One of the most apparent areas for improvement, based on the feedback received for this consultation, is the development and implementation of a comprehensive communications strategy.

Communications should aim to make partners feel engaged and involved. There should be a clear message about each National Poetry Day and a clear ask or call to action, communicated in plenty of time. If possible this should include a public-facing document (or documents) which can be shared to partners and beyond; possibly also including suggested poems on the National Poetry Day theme, and provocations to bring them to life.

A key part of any new strategy should be the loud celebration of the successes of both National Poetry Day and its partners’ contributions to it.

7.2 Press

- Promote regional coverage where possible.
- Signpost the media and the public to ongoing activity after NPD, and where possible push for attribution of programmes covered to their coordinating partner organisation.
- Celebrate instances of the above.
- Aid sustainability by brokering partnerships between partners and the press where possible.
- In areas such as Wales and Scotland make more of the local contacts of national writing/poetry agencies.

The generation of press and media attention was one of the biggest successes of Forward Arts Foundation's stewardship of National Poetry Day, however there were a couple of areas which show room for improvement.

The main areas of concern for partners were in wanting to attract a UK-wide spread to coverage on the day, and in wanting the press and the public to be signposted from National Poetry Day coverage to year-round poetry engagement.

Whilst acknowledging that a lot of this is at the mercy of each media outlet's own agenda, Forward Arts Foundation should, where possible, signpost the press and the public to ongoing activity run by the National Poetry Day partners. This would be facilitated by Forward Arts Foundation pushing for the attribution of projects featured to the organisation coordinating them, or helping to develop relationships between the press and poetry organisations beyond National Poetry Day itself.

As per the communications recommendations above, instances of success should be celebrated, especially in reference to partners' concerns.

7.3 Structure

- Develop a simple partnership outline.
- Reduce the size of steering group meetings and return their purpose to that of a steering group.
- Host larger meetings annually or bi-annually to serve the function of bringing the sector together, allowing time for networking.
- Consider appointing someone to oversee the day-to-day delivery of National Poetry Day. This role should:
 - Implement the communications strategy outlined above.
 - Act as a poetry sector-facing point of contact.
 - Introduce communications and marketing plans to consolidate the organisation's position, allowing the Director to focus on external partnerships.

The main recommendation regarding the structure of relationships between Forward Arts Foundation and the partners, is in how the steering group and its meetings operate. I would advise reducing the steering group to include just key national partners, and return the function of the meetings from organisational updates to strategic planning. Larger meetings could then be held annually or bi-annually to facilitate the sector-wide gathering that was positively received by all partners. If practical, holding meetings outside of London would be warmly received by regional partners, many of whom offered to host.

A simple partnership outline should be created to reflect these changes and detail the nature of partnership for the key steering group members, and the wider circle of stakeholders.

If financially possible, Forward Arts Foundation should consider appointing a day-to-day manager for National Poetry Day. This role would help to develop and implement marketing

and communication plans so that Forward Arts Foundation could consolidate the position National Poetry Day has achieved. It would allow this person to be the sector-facing contact, and allow the Director to then focus her attention on strategic external partnerships.

7.4 Strategy

- Galvanize and enthuse.
- Don't be afraid of taking the initiative.
- Plan a vision/strategy for the coming few years, and share it publicly as part of the communications strategy.
- Bring future activity back to this vision.
- Begin to think beyond October-to-October and use steering group meetings to this end.
- Consider Forward Arts Foundation's role as a national partner and a signposter.
- Contact The Reading Agency and CILIP about partnership work in libraries.
- Contact Poetry Ireland about the clash with Poetry Day Ireland.
- Involve HomePlace to establish stronger strategic ties in Northern Ireland.

In planning onward strategy Forward Arts Foundation should not lose sight of its key role to galvanize and enthuse. Having been successful in doing this to date, and in garnering the goodwill of a large number of partners they should not be afraid of taking the initiative and planning a bold strategy for National Poetry Day in the coming years.

This vision should be shared publicly with all the partners and should be the point which they come back to when considering future programmes. Within this Forward Arts Foundation should think about its role as a catalyst and a facilitator for partnerships within and beyond the poetry sector.

7.5 Opportunities for further investigation

- A moving regional focus following on from Hull 2017.
- The involvement of a body like CILIP or The Reading Agency in expanding National Poetry Day's reach to libraries.
- The involvement of poetry publishers, with a view to being able to offer more to schools and libraries if possible.
- A research study into the impact of poetry engagement on educational attainment, wellbeing or other criteria.
- An engagement programme which serves as a case study for the benefits of poetry engagement.
- A consideration of collaborative and strategic partnerships within and beyond the sector.

In bringing together so many partners Forward Arts Foundation has a unique position. Having established a strong National Poetry Day programme (which it can now consolidate and strengthen), there are a number of opportunities for Forward Arts Foundation to consider. The above suggestions came from partners during the consultation and are worthy

of Forward Arts Foundation's attention in thinking about how it can fulfil a need within the sector.

Many partners raised the desire for either evidence-based research or media-friendly case-studies which would demonstrate widely the impact of engagement with poetry. Achieving these by working collaboratively within the sector helps to avoid any duplication of provision. It also can utilise Forward Arts Foundation's influence as a national player, to bring in external partners to the benefit of the sector.

7.6 In summary

For all partners to work together as effectively as possible there needs to be, as in any partnership, an understanding of shared goals coupled with clear lines of communication.

What has been apparent in producing this report is that there are a number of 'quick-wins' that are readily implementable, and will bring about a positive impact on Forward Arts Foundation's ongoing relationship with partners.

The development of a longer-term strategy is something that Forward Arts Foundation will have to consider carefully, but if it puts the need of the sector first and focuses on collaborative working then it stands every chance of taking partners with it as it moves forwards.

The most reassuring note in carrying out this consultation has been the goodwill on show. One partner stated that when new to National Poetry Day they had been sceptical about how much of their organisation's budget went towards the day, and as to what might be achieved by the day. They were pleased to note that they were in the process of being gradually won over, noting: "*you get out what you put in*".

If some refinement means that Forward Arts Foundation can involve more partners and better communicate its successes then there is no reason why it won't continue to win over more partners, and in turn, more new audiences for poetry.

8. Thanks

Thanks to all participants who gave up their time to take part in the consultation, and especially to World Book Day and CILIP who generously offered to discuss their programmes even though they are not National Poetry Day partners.

9. Appendix: Discussion Guides

Questions for key national stakeholders:

What does your organisation currently do to mark National Poetry Day?
(including both activity and promotion)

Would you like to do more?

If yes, what are the barriers to this?

If no, why not?

What do you think the main aim of National Poetry Day is/should be?

How can the effect of National Poetry Day be sustained beyond the day itself?

What would you say is Forward Arts Foundation's main role in coordinating National Poetry Day?

How do you view the role of national partners in helping deliver National Poetry Day?

How could Forward Arts Foundation improve its offer to key national partners?

Schools/engagement data // advocacy // digital engagement // annual conference // Arts Award // increased press coverage // online promotion

How could Forward Arts Foundation help your organisation achieve its aims for National Poetry Day (or its wider aims)?

Do you use data from National Poetry Day to inform/drive your activity? If so how?

What do you think has worked well about National Poetry Day and Forward Arts Foundation's role in coordinating it over the last 3-4 years?

What have been the benefits to your organisation?

What could be improved?

What have been the disadvantages to your organisation?

What one thing could Forward Arts Foundation change to improve your experience of coordinating National Poetry Day activity/promotion?

What wider contribution to the poetry sector do you think National Poetry Day could make to improve the standing of poetry in the UK?

Bringing in new sponsors // contributing to increased book sales // increased public visibility

Do you have any further comments?

Questions for regional stakeholders / other interested groups:

What does your organisation currently do to mark National Poetry Day?
(including both activity and promotion)

Would you like to do more?

If yes, what are the barriers to this?
If no, why not?

What do you think the main aim of National Poetry Day is/should be?

How can the effect of National Poetry Day be sustained beyond the day itself?

What would you say is Forward Arts Foundation's main role in coordinating National Poetry Day?

How do you view the role of (regional) partner organisations in helping deliver National Poetry Day?

How could Forward Arts Foundation improve its offer to (regional) partners?

Schools/engagement data // advocacy // digital engagement // annual conference //
Arts Award // increased press coverage // online promotion

How could Forward Arts Foundation help your organisation achieve its aims for National Poetry Day (or its wider aims)?

What one thing could Forward Arts Foundation change to improve your experience of National Poetry Day?

What wider contribution to the poetry and literature sector do you think National Poetry Day could make to improve the standing of poetry in the UK?

Bringing in new sponsors // contributing to increased book sales // increased public visibility

Do you have any further comments?

Questions for organisations delivering similar programmes:

What would you say is the one main aim of your programme?

What has been the key driver to partner involvement to your programme?

incl. schools // funding partners // delivery partners

What has been the biggest barrier to overcome?

incl. schools // funding partners // delivery partners

How do you sustain the effect of your programme throughout the year?

What do you think has been the most successful element of your programme in recent years?

What could be improved?

What one piece of advice would you give to Forward Arts Foundation from your experience of managing mass engagement programmes in the literature sector?

Do you have any further comments?